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Klemmer #2.50
Another night
Another day

K645-1

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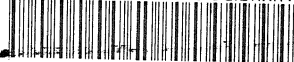


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Another Night-

Another Day

BOOKS BY JOHN KLEMPNER

Another Night, Another Day

Once Around the Block

No Stork at Nine

CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

Another Night

Another Day

By JOHN KLEMPNER

When I meet the morning beam,
Or lay me down at night to dream,
I hear my bones within me say
'Another night, another day.'

—A. E. HOUSMAN, "The Immortal"
[*A Shropshire Lad*]

New York CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS 1941

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To

MY TINA

*The characters and situations in
this novel are entirely the prod-
ucts of the author's imagination.*

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Book One

THE CALENDARS OF APRIL

CHAPTER I

THERE were times during the evening, many times, when you stood off to the side of the room, as if a mad decorator had made you part of the setting, and watched the party-weary women thrust their faces at the man you were going to marry. Watched Dale unfold like a morning-glory in the warmth of their smiles, and wondered about creatures who could find solace in gallantry that was so all-inclusive.

You could be sorry for them, you who might look your full twenty-six years in the coldness of your mirror, but who still shone youthfully in this group of tired thirties and forties. They had that party look, that blending of curls and coyness trying desperately to hide the tell-tale lines under fading make-up. You too? Not yet, please God, not yet. Not ever. They are a world apart, frightened, dissatisfied, reaching. You are young, you are engaged. The world can hold no terrors for you.

Engaged. Dale wasn't the sort of person to bind himself forever, or even for a day, and still it had happened. One night, in a mood softer than any she had known since, he had said, "You're very pretty, Connie. A little on the thin side, but pretty."

"I love my compliments diluted," she had said.

"We hit it off all right, don't we?"

"Sure we do. If I could arrange for a few pounds, properly distributed——"

"Some day," he had said dreamily, "we'll get married and live to regret it."

"Why not? I'd take a chance on all of it, even the regrets."

"It calls for a kiss," he had said. "Or champagne, if we had champagne." They didn't have champagne, so they had their kiss, and possibly that put the seal on a contract that otherwise wavered a bit. Would the champagne have made it more binding, or engraved announcements, or a twelve-karat ring? Wasn't a promise still a promise, even without the trimmings, without a notary's attestation? Of course there should be something, something more than casual words spoken as if in jest. Somewhere you might expect a moderately ardent protestation of affection. Or was that being unreasonable? Shouldn't there be the feeling, firm and sound and unassailable, that what they had was tight and solid, to last down through the years? But of course Dale wasn't like other men.

"We're sort of engaged," he would say. So nice. Meet my fiancé. Or perhaps he isn't. It all depends on the day or the mood or the phase of the moon. We never quite know. It's wrong, wrong. Aren't there some conditions that shouldn't be qualified, like dead or pregnant or engaged? You either are or you aren't.

Perhaps you give these things more consideration when you reach a certain age. Each birthday a venerable gentleman with a scythe in his skinny hand takes down a number opposite your name and posts a new one, always, relentlessly, a figure just higher than the one before. A natural, normal process, bluntly called growing old. He had the next number ready for Connie, and it said '27' in no uncertain manner. Just a few more of those and

you hit '30', and then you could sit back, still unmarried, and start wondering. That party look. You can't help thinking about it. When does it begin? Anxious, haunted, worried, alone, imploring attention and seeing it slip further from you every day, every year. And time was unimportant to Dale. He could easily forget to telephone you for a week, a month, or even three years. A trifling oversight, he would say, meant to call you years ago but it slipped my mind, just wanted to let you know we're still engaged, unless, of course, you've made other plans in the meantime——

Connie took a deep breath and let herself slide back into the present. She didn't enjoy her flights of fancy. They were always on the gloomy side. Here they were, at a party for some unseen celebrity, the rooms teeming with people she didn't know. There was her sister, sitting demurely next to her husband, and Dale, of course, and Obie. There was that big fellow standing apart from the others, lonely, like herself, seeming a bit bewildered at finding himself part of the peculiar gathering. Brady, his name was, Hank Brady. He'd mumbled something when Obie introduced them and then had gone off behind some furniture, his face red, to do penance. He was standing there, awkward, alone, a glass of ginger-ale in his hand, sipping it slowly, as if afraid that he might have to mingle with the frightening guests when he finished.

Dale was surrounded. There was nothing new about that. Connie could cling to his arm until they approached a roomful of people, but then he would shake her off as if she were a stuffy overcoat and ignore her in a bland and blissful way until they were ready to leave. Ducky. She shrugged. She was accustomed to that by now. Probably after marriage she'd be lucky to see him at all.

Off to the other side of the room she could see her sister, Martha, trying to look as if all the life hadn't gone out of her body long ago. You could laugh at these parties if you wanted to, but they were something for Martha. A chance to primp in her only decent dress, to fuss with her soft brown hair so that it fell in gentle waves around her thin face, to let the excitement of being with people bring new color to her pale smooth cheeks. To step out with her husband, Baxter, neat and dignified in his rimless glasses, sharing his fear that the shine of his trousers might be too conspicuous.

Connie moved uneasily. She would have to join the others sooner or later. She walked slowly past Hank, smiling up at him. He smiled in return, and took an embarrassed sip from his glass, shy, as if ashamed that Nature had made him taller than his-fellow-men. Dale was about Connie's height, perhaps a little taller. He was sitting there on the couch, surrounded by his protective bevy of wide-eyed females. She could look at him dispassionately now, as if she were one of the admiring strangers. He was good-looking, his features even and his hair light and thick and unruly. He was charming, his smile seeming to encompass the group and linger with each of his listeners as if intended for her alone. He knew his stuff. No wonder they went for him.

Dale was talking. There was nothing new about that. Park him in the center of a group and you could depend upon that if upon nothing else. "My grandfather was born in Artichokia," Dale was saying, sure of his audience. "A lovely little country, full of blooming orchards and verdant meadows and growing deficits."

A woman with her hair back of her ears thrust her buck teeth at him. "Is there really such a place?"

Dale looked at her severely. "The flower of modern civilization." He half-rose to his feet and burlesqued a salute, then slumped back. "A land of initiative and opportunity. A leader in progress, in art, in industry. Artichokia was the first, the very first, to store wheat in bursting warehouses while the starving populace looked on with patriotic pride. Hail, Artichokia. Now other countries rush to follow this admirable example." He glanced up and saw Connie. "Hello there," he called, motioning to her to join the group.

"Hello," she said. "Boosting your vegetable kingdom again?"

He smiled. "Is there really such a place?"

"My grandfather was born there," she said.

He turned to the others, absolved. "See? It's a land of enlightenment and grandfathers. Forward, always forward, in science, schools, and government. Artichokia leads, and others follow. Take the vote. The voice of the people rules in this fair land. There are two parties there, which is just as it should be. Unfortunately, the same candidate runs on both tickets. But the people have their choice. They can vote for him through one party or the other. This excellent device is called democracy. Any one objecting to it is shot. Ah, Artichokia. A lovely place. Trees, and snow-capped hills, and secret police, and spies. Land of the free, with rivulets that smile as they greet the sea, and tax collectors that laugh aloud as they greet the populace. My grandfather discovered it, one snowy day back in eighteen sixty-three——"

"I thought he was born there," said the woman with the teeth.

"He was," Dale said, easily. "That was the day he discovered it."

Connie edged away from the group. She'd heard it all before. Many times. It was part of Dale's line. Anything to keep them listening. Anything. She saw Martha trying to catch her eye. She smiled to her, but sidled in the other direction. The big fellow was still standing around as if the world had slipped away and deserted him. Hank Brady. He felt as she did, alone. You couldn't cure that by standing in a corner. She took a few steps, seemingly aimless, but managed to land at his side. He was studying his ginger-ale assiduously. "Hello there," she said. "Having a good time?"

"So-so," he said. "My circulation stopped an hour ago."

"Atrophy. You need a drink. You'll never cure anything with that stuff."

"Ginger-ale," he confessed. "You let the fizz die and people think it's Scotch."

"You haven't fooled any one. I think we have the same symptoms. How about a drink? A real drink?"

"Sure. What's *your* ailment?"

She glanced at Dale, involuntarily, then turned quickly back to Hank. "Nothing that time won't cure. A few centuries. I'd rather drink than wait. What do you say?"

"Your boy friend?"

She nodded. "We came together."

Hank smiled. "He sure can talk."

Connie smiled back at him. "Why do you suppose I need a drink?"

There were tables in the next room, some piled high with platters of tiny sandwiches, some displaying proud assortments of bottles of different shapes and colors. She pointed to the Scotch and he filled two of the small glasses. "Straight?" he said.

"Straight. I don't drink much, but I hate to spoil it when I do." She emptied her glass with a quick easy motion, but shook her head when he offered to refill it. "That's all for now. I'm virtually awake." She threw back her shoulders. "What's a big fellow like you doing at one of these affairs? Who brought you, anyhow?"

"Obie. Obie Smythe. You know. He introduced us."

"That's right. How do you know him? He your agent?"

"My what?" He laughed. "Hell, no. Do I look like the sort of person who has an agent?"

She pretended to dry her forehead in mock relief. "Then you don't write books? Or plays? Or even poetry?"

"Pro basketball," he said. "A few years ago. Back in nineteen thirty-two, three, four. Obie used to manage our team. We played up and down the Eastern Circuit. As tough a bunch as you ever saw. Obie too. He's quieted down a lot. I run into him every now and then. He dragged me up here. Said something about the lure of liquor and loose women. I'd rather have a hamburger. What's the party for?"

"Literary celebrity," she said. "They're all celebrities, as a matter of fact, bursting with unproduced plays and unpublished poetry."

"You too?"

"Sorry," she admitted. "I've written some poems. I don't belong, though. I'm a basketball player at heart."

He looked at her with new interest. "Did you ever play?"

"Sure. At college. Inter-class stuff. You didn't have to be very good."

"What position?"

"Side-center," she said, proudly.

He threw back his head and laughed. "No kidding? Side-center?"

"What's so funny about that?"

"I'm sorry. It sounds funny. Sissy rules."

"Oh." She put her glass down and turned away. "Sissy rules, hey? What did you expect? We were girls, you know, some of us were, back in the good old days."

Martha reached over and tried to pull Baxter to his feet. "Come on," she said, "let's dance."

He patted her hand, but didn't rise. "We're too old for that sort of stuff. I'd rather sit around and watch."

She sat on the foot-stool at his feet. "Don't group me with those old birds. Look at them. Half of them are older than my grandmother. What's the matter with you? Don't you remember when we reached the last four in that Danceland contest? You yourself said we would have won if it hadn't been fixed. That was——"

"Nineteen twenty-four. Fifteen years ago. Good God, Martha, you were twenty-two then, maybe twenty-three."

"What of it? I'm not dead yet. What's fifteen years?"

Fifteen years. But it was a lifetime. They'd run the gamut in those fifteen years, from the top of the heap to the very bottom. And when they bumped they'd come to rest, and they would never rise again. She knew it, and Baxter did, too. He was through. He'd lost something. Some spark that had made him click, years ago. You can't keep running up against hard luck, year after year, and come out whole. At first you grin and bear it, chin up, good old Cunningham courage, and then after a while you want to keep out of sight so that the old jinx can't find you to hit you again. Bax had held his position,

pay cuts and all, until nineteen thirty-one, but that year even the better men went out, and he was one of them. That was some year. Nobody wanted you. Nobody. You could wave your law degree at them, Harvard nineteen twenty, and a special laudatory letter from Professor Hopkins, and of course everybody knew Professor Hopkins, but what difference did it make? Nobody wanted anybody for anything. That was the way things were then. And after that he'd slipped, and slipped, and now all he wanted to do was to sit off in a corner, and be let alone, and not even try to think, because he'd become unaccustomed to thinking.

Martha was looking at him, her mouth firm and unsmiling. Maybe they were too old. She was thirty-eight, and Baxter was forty-four. But they were still alive, or weren't they? Maybe not. Mere shadows, moving through a strange existence, eating and sleeping and breathing, and not living. What had happened to them? Other people had gone through the depression and come out whole. Not the Baxter Cunninghams. They couldn't take it. But Baxter had tried, tried so very hard, but it had done things to him, left him a different, a weaker person. She hated to admit it, but it was so. Last year he'd taken out his old law books to prove to himself that he was as keen as ever. But he couldn't concentrate, and the problems were too involved, problems that he would have eaten up a few years ago, and he put them aside for the moment and never took them up again. Proof. You didn't need better proof than that.

What could she do to stir him? "I want to dance," she said, eagerly. "What do we come to these parties for, anyhow?"

"Food," he said, settling back in his chair, "and they don't give you a hell of a lot of that."

"Well, get up. We'll walk past the sandwich table seven or eight times and maybe we can save a meal. Fifty cents is fifty cents. I'll use it to buy a facial. Then maybe you won't be ashamed of your old wife."

"Martha!" He jumped to his feet, hurt. "You're younger and prettier than any of them. You know I'm not ashamed. I think—I think you're wonderful."

She smiled, upset. "You still remember the sweet things to say."

"It's not a question of remembering," he said. "I say what I feel. Nothing else."

She rose too and squeezed his hand affectionately. "Thanks," she said, trying to swallow the funny feeling in her throat.

He stood before her, erect, so that his eyes were on the same level with hers, then bowed, ever so slightly. "Shall we dance?" he said.

Obie patted his scraggly hair into place. He was a little man, and standing next to Hank made him seem even smaller. "Like it?" he asked, feeling a sense of responsibility.

"Terrific," Hank said. "I'll be asleep any minute now."

"Talk to people. Don't stand around as if you'd lost your suspenders. Did you meet any of the girls?"

"One. The one that writes poetry."

"They all write poetry."

"Your good-looking friend. Connie. What's her last name?"

"Rawlings. Connie Rawlings. Nice girl. Did you meet her sister?"

"Wait a minute," Hank said. "I don't like sisters."

"You'd like this one. Martha. The thin one over there in the black dress. Swell girl. I've known her for years."

"Married?"

"Martha? Yes. That's her husband. The little fellow. Let's see, I met the Rawlings girls back in nineteen-nineteen. Connie was just a scrawny kid then. Boy, I went for Martha in a big way. You know, it's tough when you fall for a girl who's a good inch taller than you are. Funny. I used to think that was why I lost out. Then she marries this Baxter Cunningham the seventh and damned if he's much bigger than I am." He smiled, a faraway look in his eyes. "Swell girl."

"I'll be around," Hank said. "I'm going to try to get something to eat."

"Over there," Obie said, pointing to the sandwich table.

"That stuff wouldn't feed a canary. Where's the kitchen?"

"That way. You'll probably find a refrigerator full of manuscripts."

"I'll try." He found the kitchen and opened the cupboard. There was a loaf of white bread, ready-cut. It's funny, he thought, snooping around like this and not even knowing who owns the apartment. That couldn't happen anywhere but in New York. He took two of the slices and spread butter on them, then looked for some cheese or meat but couldn't find any. He went back to the living-room and scooped up a handful of the tiny sandwiches, took them back to the kitchen and spread them carefully between his slices. Then he held it before him, proud of his achievement.

Connie came in and watched him, smiling. He looked up and saw her. "Private," he said. "Please knock."

"Sorry I disturbed you," she said. "Where's your girl? Under the table?"

He showed her the sandwich. "I came in for this. More fun than women any day."

"It's no more than I would expect of a basketball player."

"Side center," he said, mockingly. "Did you wear pink uniforms?"

She screwed up her face. "I'll never forget the time we played the Jersey City Punks," she said. "They had four men and a gorilla. The gorilla was the smart one."

"No kidding." He broke off a piece of the sandwich. "Hungry?"

"That looks good."

He handed it to her. "My own invention."

She took a big bite. "Say, that's clever. I think I'll take back what I said about the gorilla."

"I don't mind. I've played against gorillas."

"I never knew Obie managed basketball teams. He did some crazy things. That's funny. I could have known you long ago, before—well, years ago. He never told me about you."

"Connie Rawlings," he said, thinking. "Seems to me I've heard that name. Are you famous?"

"No. I've had a few poems published. Not in the magazines you'd read. Did you really know my name?" She was pleased at the thought. "I made one of the anthologies. I sign the poems, Constance Gwynn Rawlings. It sounds more impressive."

"Oh, I know," he said. "Butch Rawlings. He used to play with Williamsport. Big ugly fellow. He was good, drunk or sober. You're not related to him, are you?"

"Butch Rawlings," she said thoughtfully. "Ugly and

drunk." She shook her head. "No, I never heard of Butchie, but I'll swear he sounds like a relative."

The girl in the tight-fitting taffeta edged closer to Obie at the drink-table. "Quit shoving," he said. Then he turned to look at her. "Holy fishes," he said. "Young and beautiful. Where did you come from?"

"Could you be good enough to get me a drink?" she asked.

"Say," he said. "All the beer in Milwaukee. Are you sure you're at the right party?"

"Oh yes. I was invited." She spoke with a soft Southern accent. "I thought I would meet my friend here but he hasn't arrived. It's all right, isn't it?"

"Sure. Sure. It's better than all right. I'll take care of you. What's your name?"

"Betty Lou Saunders."

"Say, now. Betty Lou. A you-all?"

"Montgomery, Alabama, suh," she said.

"Boy oh boy." He stepped back and looked at her. "My name's Obie Smythe. Spelled with a Y."

"Oh, I know you, Mr. Smythe. You're the theatrical agent." She put her arm in his and pressed close to him. "I studied dramatics, Mr. Smythe. Studied real hard, too. Back in Montgomery. I'm going to be a great actress, some day."

"Oh," he said, gloomily. "Sure. Some day. Just now you need an agent and a couple of months' salary in advance."

"No," she said, hastily. "I don't want anything. Only a chance to act. I have a job. I get along fine. But I can act. I know I can." She let her eyes rest on him, appealing.

"Well," he said, doubtfully, "we'll think it over." She

was pretty, all right, and cuter than hell, her little shape pushing at the tightness of her dress. Somehow he couldn't hold them, the young and pretty ones. He could talk to them for a few minutes and then they always slipped off with somebody else. Not this one. He wanted her to stay with him. "Listen," he said. "I'll let you talk to a great playwright. Maybe he'll star you in one of his plays."

"Oh, Mr. Smythe," she said.

Dale could help him keep things going until he got a little more confidence. He was like a kid when it came to girls. Especially the young ones. He went warm all over, and his thin hair would start curling up to the more remote regions at the top of his head. "Wait here a second. Don't get lost." He dried the perspiration from his forehead and tried to pat his hair into place. "Hey," he called, across the room. "Hey, Edwin."

Dale met his glance. "What now?"

"Come here. Cable from Artichokia. Important."

"Pardon me," Dale said, getting up.

Obie took his arm. "Sorry to drag you away from your adoring girl-friend."

Dale made a face. "Sloppy Susie. The girl with the negative personality and positive Wassermann. You can have her."

"See what I found." Betty Lou gave him her shy smile.

Dale looked her over as if he were going to buy her. "Good hunting. Whose is she?"

"Mine," Obie said. "Aixlay offnay. Betty Lou. This is Dale Edwin, the great American playwright."

"What was the name again?" she said.

Dale laughed. "There goes my fame. Carve it on my tombstone. What was the name again?"

"You stand there," Obie said, "a serious, intelligent

resident of Montgomery, Alabama, and tell me you never heard of Dale Edwin?"

"I've heard of Shakespeare," she said. "And—and Shaw."

Dale nodded sagely. "The girl's been around."

"They aren't Americans," Obie said.

"Are you really a playwright?" she asked. "Show me your palm. I can tell."

"Palm reader?"

She nodded. "A little." She took Dale's hand and turned the palm upward and scrutinized it in the dim light. "Shall I?"

"Sure. Make it good."

"I'll tell you what I see." She held his hand closer to the table-lamp. "The light isn't very good. H'm. I can see that you're fickle. What do you call that? Round heels?"

"Right in my palm, eh?"

"Plain as day."

"Show me," he said.

She pointed to a wavy line. "Heart line. All in notches. One for every girl." She took Obie's palm and glanced at it critically. "Not you. You pretend, but you find the right girl and you stick to her."

"Maybe," Obie said. "If I find her."

Dale took her palm and looked at it. "You're all notched up yourself," he said.

She pulled her hand away. "It's your palm we're reading. Let's see." She studied his lines again. "Your fate line is tremendous. Skyrocket formation. Up fast and down fast. And spectacular, too."

"Know the Chinese description of a toboggan ride?" Dale asked. "Wheeeee. Walkee back mile."

"That's you," she said, confidently.

"You see all that in one line, eh? I'd rather hear about the girls."

"Not much of interest in the heart line," she said. "But that line of fate! Quick success, quick failure. It's plain as day."

"Adorable," Dale said. "Well, thanks for the toboggan ride. At least I get up there. Nice knowing you, Alabama. Hang on to that Southern accent, and everything. Be seeing you." He bowed in exaggerated politeness. "Be seeing yo' all," he corrected, as he turned away.

She looked up at Obie with her wide eyes. "Read your palm, Mr. Smythe?"

"Obie," he said. "Everybody calls me Obie."

"Obie," she said. "Shall I read your palm?"

He shook his head. "I don't go in for that stuff." He couldn't take his eyes from her soft lovely face. "Betty Lou," he said. "Betty Lou. It sounds like a stream running through a shaded forest. That's what you look like, too."

"Oh," she said, pleased, "that's real sweet. Like poetry, isn't it? Do you write, too?"

"Me? No, not me. I can tell what's wrong with a play but I can't even do a repair job. I can't write. Say. If you expect to act you ought to have an agent. You say you have a job? What do you do?"

"Model hats. At Carleton's. I can get away now and then for a day-out. I'll give you my number."

"Hang on to your job. I'll try to get you bits, if I can."

"Oh, Mr. Smythe," she said, stepping close to him again. "Obie, I mean."

"How about that drink?"

"I don't know. No, I don't think so. It changes things, and I sort of like them the way they are just now."

He took a long breath, summoning up courage, and let his hand slip over hers. She moved her fingers so that she could press his. He could feel the warmth creep across his forehead again. "This—this boy friend," he said. "Steady, or anything?"

"Just a friend. Nothing serious."

"You—you're not married?"

"Goodness, no."

"Well," he said, relieved, "what are you doing for the next four or five years?"

"I don't know," she said, in her soft sweet way, "but whatever it is, it would be nice to do it with you."

Obie looked at her, his lips set, wondering. This might develop into something more serious than he wanted. And still, with her it could be fun enough to be worth while.

Connie moved uneasily. It was no use. Dale was back on his couch again, encircled by the same silly crowd. Connie could let herself be one of them, stupid and adoring, or she could take care of herself, roaming around the strange place, pretending she was enjoying herself, until it was time to leave. Then Dale would pick her up, as if she were a hat or an umbrella, and she would have the privilege of his company for the short ride home. She didn't have to stand for that. Even a fiancée of extremely doubtful status has some rights. Nobody could criticize her if she looked around. There was the big fellow, Hankus Pankus, the reformed basketball player. He seemed to be all over the place. Just look at any empty wall and you'd see him standing there. That in itself

was strange. The apartment had at least eight rooms and still no matter where you went you ran into him.

There was no earthly reason for that. He didn't have to haunt her. She would go right over to him and let him know that she didn't particularly like it. Tell him to stick to one wall, if he had to be a wall-flower, and not try papering an eight-room apartment. She stood before him, trying to appear angry. "Why don't you adjust yourself?" she said, severely. "Sink into a couch somewhere, the way others do, and drape four or five of the girls around you. Bad enough that I keep bouncing all over the place. How is it I see you wherever I go?"

He looked at her contritely. "I've been sort of following you, you know."

Then it *was* that—not her imagination. "Were you?" "Sure."

"What do you want?"

"Company, I guess. I don't know. I've tried mingling with the others and I don't fit. You and I got along all right. Why break it up? Let's stand here, alone, and gab."

"O.K.," she said. "You asked for it. What'll it be?"

"Anything. About you."

"My father used to have a set formula. Soon as he met you he'd get your name, age, religion, and party. He'd decide from that whether it was worth going on."

"All right. That'll do for a starter."

"He was fifty-two when he died," she said. "A Unitarian, and a Republican from way back."

"I didn't mean the old man. I meant you."

"Well, you know the name. The age is twenty-six, and the rest doesn't matter. Now let's try it on you."

"All right," he said, slowly, as if he were being inter-

viewed, "the full name is Henry Aloysius Brady. Born in a little mining town near Pittsburgh about thirty years ago. I'm not set on religion or politics. There's too wide a scope. I figure you're born male or female, and from that point on you ought to start choosing. Be an Episcopalian this year, and a single-taxer the next. See how it works out. If one God doesn't come through for you, maybe another will. I wouldn't let anybody dump a religion on me any more than I would a political party. There's too much switching. I don't have to be branded, or labelled, like a Holstein cow, today; tomorrow, and for all time. I like to have a little leeway, so I can shift a bit."

She looked at him with new interest. "You don't talk like a mining town."

"Carnegie Tech, Nineteen Thirty-two. Majored in football and basketball. I was supposed to have studied engineering on the side, but that got misplaced somehow. You don't want any bridges built?"

"Not just now," she said. "I could use a first-class repair job on a curling-iron."

He shook his head. "Bridges or basketball. I flunked out on curling-irons."

"Just my luck." She moved uncomfortably, turning to where Dale was sitting. He was still surrounded by girls, smiling as he poured his practiced honeyed words to their eager faces. How could they go on that way, hour after hour? She was getting sleepy, feeling the weariness spread through her body. "What time is it?" she said.

"Two o'clock. Two-ten."

"Good Lord!" It would be nice to go home, nice to slip out without saying good-bye to anybody. She was tired of being an umbrella. Once she had dashed off to South America because New York had bored her. Now it would

be the hazardous trip from Washington Square to West Twenty-fourth Street. Well. With the protection of Big Boy Brady and a small part of the New York Police Force, there was a fair chance of making it. She could duck out while Dale was placing a slightly-worn epigram around the willing shoulders of Mrs. Buck-Teeth. When he looked for her she'd be gone. And wouldn't he be annoyed! I know I had something when I came in, he would say. A book, or a muffler, or maybe it was a girl. . . .

But you don't suddenly walk out on a party with a big strong fellow you'd never seen before, do you now? No, you certainly don't. Especially leaving behind the one to whom you are so very dear, so very dear, the one who will some day love and honor and cherish you, if he should happen to get around to it. No. You just don't do those things. A basketball player is all right in his place, his place being an arena where he can gallop joyfully in his brazen semi-nudity. Not at the side of Constance Gwynn Rawlings, minor poet and somewhat engaged young lady. You don't do those things. That is, some people don't, but then some people don't chuck up good jobs to go plodding through the jungle, either. She was an individual, a personality, and she could do as she damned pleased.

She stood before him, regal, determined. "Say," she said, "you wouldn't be interested in taking a girl home, would you?"

CHAPTER 2

A COLD breeze swept up Eighth Street and bounced dejectedly off the stiff colorless buildings. Over the low roof-tops the stars blinked, placid in their resignation to the brighter Neon lights that blazed from the bolder stores. The clattering buses bumped along the uneven street, hogging precious elbow-room from the haughtier taxis. People dotted the street, ordinary people, arms full of bags bursting with rolls and milk for tomorrow's breakfast. Here and there a sightseer from The Bronx peered into the faces of passers-by, looking for something queer.

Connie threw back her shoulders and took long breaths of the cool fresh air. "Get the smoke out of your lungs," she said. "How long were we in that place, anyhow?"

"Mind if we walk?" he asked, taking her arm. "I'm not much on taxis."

"Aren't you? Dale takes a cab to get across the street."

"I don't like it. It's soft. The easy way. Like adopting a baby. Civilization falling apart." He turned and saw that she was nodding in agreement. "I hate self-indulgence. It isn't the money. I'd rather walk and give the dollar to somebody who needs it."

"Some taxi-driver."

"I've done it," he said, "when my conscience bothered me."

She smiled. "How about the tip?"

"You're right, at that. The next one gets an extra dime." He paused as they reached the corner. "Which way?"

She pointed uptown. "Twenty-fourth Street. You'll have to take it easy. I have high heels and a guilty conscience." She pressed his arm closer as they turned up Seventh Avenue.

He didn't say anything for a while. The wind, coming from the East, was broken by the high Avenue houses, so that they walked in comfort until they reached a street intersection. Then she held her free hand over her throat and clung to him with her other arm. At intervals cruising taxis approached them, creeping suggestively along the curb, then speeding by grumpily when the chance for business faded. After a while he said, "What's the guilty conscience? Walking out on the boy friend?"

"We're engaged," she said, simply. "Engaged to be married."

He let her arm drop, as if their present proximity was wrong. "Are you? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You look too honorable. You'd say horrors, or whatever it is a basketball player says. Wouldn't you? I wanted you to take me home. I practically grabbed you and dragged you along. Didn't I?"

"You did at that. Tell me more." His voice was colder. "I suppose I remind you of your mother."

"What's that?"

"I mean, you probably have some reason for walking off with me."

She laughed, softly. "You don't know me. I don't have reasons. I'm scatter-brained, moved by emotions. The thing least important to me is common-sense." She tucked her fingers inside his arm again and he let them stay

there, making no move to hold her. "You either feel things or you don't, deep down inside. Your feet getting warm and cold and your knees trembling. That's when they count. Sometimes nothing happens. Like the first time I saw my name in print. I expected something, I don't know what, but it wasn't there. I just looked at it long and hard, *Nocturne*, by Constance Gwynn Rawlings, and I wondered what had happened to the expected thrill. That's the way it was with this engagement. Now you see it and now you don't. I'll have to ask Dale where we stand. I never know."

"Nocturne," he said, solemnly. "I'll bet you have it framed somewhere."

She shook her head. "I kept it for a long time, and then one day I cleaned house. All first poems are called *Nocturne*. Did you know that?"

"Sure," he said, sagely. "Everybody knows that."

"Things *have* moved me," she said, eagerly. "I'm not made of ice. Some things. Not the ones you would expect. It's funny. I've had the craziest adventures, and I could never feel that they were happening to me. As if I weren't even there. Do you know what I mean?"

"Adventures," he said, laughing. "The soup burned, or you had to change the ribbon on your typewriter."

"I was teaching in Georgetown," she said, thoughtfully. "Down in British Guiana. One of the young explorers asked me if I'd like to go into the bush."

"That's something," he said. "You could do that right here in Central Park."

"That's what they call the jungle, there. The bush. He had some orders on his books, a jaguar for the St. Louis Zoo, some tropical fish for a large dealer in New York, and a few odd birds and things."

"It sounds like big business, bring 'em back alive, at seven and a half percent commission."

"His wife was there. She was getting tired of chasing animals all alone. She wanted companionship, and somebody to snap pictures."

He looked at her to see if she was serious. "Do you mean it? I thought it was some sort of gag."

"No. I taught in British Guiana for more than a year. Georgetown is the biggest city there. The only real city. There were lots of expeditions into the bush. It's like the cloak and suit industry in New York."

He shook his head. "Not for Brady. I think you have to be a bit nutty to go in for that stuff."

"Probably. Leaving a clean warm home for the filth and discomforts of the jungle." She looked off into the distance, watching the pattern of lights that dotted the street.

"You really went?"

"Sure. Three weeks of it. I got leave of absence from the school. It was exciting. Scary. New places. Adventures every day. And now it's just as if I'd read it in a travel book. We slept in hammocks, under nets, and if you looked out into the blackness you could see eyes shining at you. Just like those little lights."

"And you weren't afraid?"

"I was petrified, but it didn't seem to matter. As if somebody were to be stewed by cannibals for breakfast, with me watching all their preparations and then suddenly realizing that I was the one in the pot. I couldn't believe that whatever was happening was happening to me. The man and his wife used to tell me there was nothing to fear. They were brave, in a different way. He said the bushmasters got too sleepy after a meal to bother you.

He'd walk right up to one and snap his fingers at him. I wouldn't take a chance, just my luck I'd pick one with insomnia. Once I saw him catch a rattlesnake with his bare hands and a forked stick. I think I felt like fainting that time. Not for long. You get to accept those things."

"You're sure you didn't read it all? Daredevil Dick in the Tropics? You don't look the type."

"One day we ate paca. That was a delicacy. Plain ratmeat. Ugh." She shuddered. "Yes, it happened, I was there and I didn't see it in the movies. I came back and taught the skinny native kids, just as if I had never been away. Net result, an eight-line poem of uneven rhythm."

"Why did you do it? What did you expect?"

"I don't know. He asked me. I do things first and think about them afterwards. Only I don't even think about them. Just accept them, and let it go at that."

"Would you do it again?"

"Not now. In my dotage. I don't know. Maybe I would at that. I get a sudden inspiration, then I do the wrong thing."

"You're slowing up," he said. "Settling back to sedate middle age. You'll probably put on forty pounds and move to Washington Heights."

"You don't know Dale," she said thoughtfully. "Or me. We do things on impulse only. Never through good sound common-sense. We were almost married one day, only the law stepped in. We borrowed Obie's car and drove up to Greenwich and got a license. They used to call it the city of easy marriage. Times must have changed. They told us we'd have to wait five days. We're still waiting. The impulse died, or else it got awfully sick. That's the way Fate steps in. Otherwise I'd have a fair share of

those forty pounds by now. I suppose the legislators figure that if your terrific desire can't survive a five-day wait you're better off unmarried. It's so, isn't it?"

"You were as close as all that?"

"As close as that. It's hard to believe. I suppose my whole life is that way. Almost this and nearly that, and then I go on much as before."

"At least things happen to you," he said, restlessly. "Look at me. I get up at approximately the right time, and I eat three meals, and I go to bed at night. I never even snapped my fingers at a caterpillar. A big fellow living a little life. It's getting me. I used to work for a large sporting-goods company. The man over me was a Mr. Partridge. Mr. Partridge had stories, wild exciting stories. Every day he'd tell me what the little woman had for supper the night before, and how brother Luke dropped in for a chat, and how they spoke about the weather and the lady next door with the fat legs."

"Yes," she said, as he paused.

"The fat woman's husband earned two hundred and sixty dollars a month, and every time he got his check she went out and bought a lamp. Never failed. And then there was always Brother Luke on the weather. I heard about them day after day, the lady next door and Brother Luke. Mr. Partridge never shot a leopard or caught an alligator with his bare hands. He was a little man and he lived a little life, and he talked about it, and talked about it. Three potatoes for supper, and two slices of bread, and God knows where that pound of butter went, and then Brother Luke dropped over and said that it was blowing up in the East and more than likely we'd have rain before Christmas."

"I understand," she said. "I'm sorry about my stories,

I don't tell them often. I didn't mean to make a nuisance of myself."

"I loved it," he said eagerly. "I just wanted you to see my life, by contrast. This fellow had my nerves on edge. Sometimes I wanted to shut him up, any way, choke the wind out of him, anything to keep him quiet. Well, one day I was pretty much upset, something personal, my sister hadn't been well, and they discovered that it was cancer—" He paused and made a hopeless gesture.

"Oh," she said, softly. "I'm sorry."

"She's gone now. But the day I learned about it, it was too much. I felt that I couldn't stand it, and then Mr. Partridge appeared for his morning chit-chat. Well, he said, the little woman sure put on a feed yesterday. Yessir, he went right through his meal from tomato juice to apple pie, sing-song, monotonous, and then of course Brother Luke came over with the weather report." Hank's voice was dropping, in unconscious imitation of Mr. Partridge's dull recital. "I couldn't stand it," he said, suddenly, in a louder tone. "I couldn't. I pounded the desk so that it nearly split, and if my voice didn't crack then it never will. Damn it to hell, I shouted, I've heard that story Christ knows how many times, and damned if I'm going to hear it again! And I rushed out of the office, and I went to the men's room and shut myself in and I sat there and cried like a baby. Do you see? Excitement, thrills, adventure. And you only chased a rattlesnake."

"It moved you," she said. "That's what counts. My things didn't touch me. What did your boss do about it?"

"Damned if you don't sound interested. Look. This is how I feel. There are important things in life, things we never get around to discussing because we're too busy swapping comments on the weather. Weather, and food,

and the lady next door with the fat legs. Never feelings, emotions, what makes them go." He glanced at her again, then kept on walking, not saying any more.

"Go ahead," she said, after a while.

"First tell me if I'm crazy."

"If you are, I want to be."

"My father worked in the mines," he said thoughtfully. "Near Pittsburgh. He was big, bigger than I, big and strong and lovable, and he poured his life into the mines. No accident, you know, no sensational headlines and company speeches and flowers, just the slow trickling of a man's life into the darkness. As if it were a prison. No son of mine is going into the mines, he used to say. Proud. He knew what it was doing to him. But he didn't know why. That's what I mean. If a judge sentences you to death he tells you the reason. Dad didn't know. There's more to life than a weekly pay-check. Or isn't there? I want to know."

"You'll find out. You're the sort that will dig for things."

"Maybe." He spread his hands before him. "Look at these mitts. I can palm a basketball in one of them. But I don't dig with them. Not with my hands, and not with whatever brains I have. That's what hurts. I sit and listen to the Mr. Partridges solve the problems of the universe." He took a long breath and smiled. "I haven't talked as much as this in all my days put together."

"I'm the world's champion listener," she said. "Maybe the only one left."

"I thought *I* was. You should have seen me with the old boy Partridge. I'd listen for a solid hour and never a chirp out of me."

"What happened? Were you fired?"

"No." He grinned. "He put it down as temporary insanity. Next day he was at it again. Brother Luke arranging the weather for the coming week, and damned if the lady next door with the fat legs didn't buy another lamp. Ho hum." He stretched as if ending an interlude in his life. "I'm not there any more. Some other worm is listening to the same stories, reaching just as eagerly for his monthly pay-check, watching life slip by him and not doing a damned thing about it."

"What do you do now?"

"Sporting-goods. I own a store down on Thirteenth Street. Hank Brady, Sports. Between customers I dream of what I'd like to do."

"Such as?"

He moved his long arms uneasily. "I don't know. I have dim notions that tie in some way with people. Getting back to them, being part of them, living their lives and doing their work. Now I'm like a clerk at a ribbon counter, six feet and a hundred and ninety pounds of me measuring off dainty bits of lace. I'm too big for that sort of thing. Too strong. Do you see what I mean?"

"I do," she said. "Things you do aren't part of you, aren't important to you. I'm the same. Adventures. They've slipped by me. Missed me completely, as if they hadn't happened. Silly things move me, little unimportant things, like a sunset, or a baby crying. I'll never forget my mother's funeral, tears streaming down my cheeks and my mind wandering. I wasn't moved. I've thought of that often. Inside, deep down inside, I wasn't touched. I was crying, yes, but it was the sombre setting, the noisy snivelling people, the dreariness, the drone of the minister's voice, the sudden feeling of loneliness. But I was thinking of other things, of the cold soggianness of earth, and how old

my aunts looked, how old and ugly in their tears. Things like that, and I wondered if I was wicked but it didn't seem to matter. That was the way I was."

"You're real," he said. "Honest with yourself."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I don't understand why I do things. There's so much more. It comes back to me piecemeal and then I wonder if it really happened to me. I seldom tell people. It's easier to listen. Bring on your Mr. Partridge."

"You'd better be off with your jaguars. Jaguars. Rat-meat. It's hard to believe. You look too clean. I can see you with a frying-pan and a spotless white waist wondering how to fry an egg. You're a Schrafft girl, vanilla sundæ and a copy of the *New Yorker* propped up in front of you."

"I've settled down," she said. "I'm not crazy any more. Maybe the impulses are few and far between. I remember when I left a job, a good job, too, because my boss didn't wish me a Merry Christmas. I couldn't stand it. A ten-cent handkerchief and I would have been happy. I just walked out and never came back. I wouldn't do it now. I'm getting along fine at my work and I'd hate to leave. I must have changed. I don't feel like going to China any more. Even to Brooklyn. I have money in the bank. Something I wouldn't have believed. Forty dollars. I'm one of those bloated capitalists you read about."

"You're O. K.," he said, seriously. "I've been around a long time and I've never seen anybody like you."

They stopped as the traffic lights snapped to red at Twenty-third Street. "We're almost home," she said, watching the cars dash by them. "I'm sorry. It was nice." She tilted her head so that her eyes met his.

"Are you?" he said, studying her face. "I am too." He

lifted her chin with his thumb. "What color are your eyes, anyway? I thought they were brown."

"I don't know. They change."

"Hazel?"

"I suppose so. Or green or gray at times, but hazel, if you want to be sweet about it."

"It's perfect," he said, "with your chestnut hair."

"With my dull brown hair. We try to avoid that subject."

"It's a lovely color. I like it. Do you mind?"

"Do you really think so?" she asked, pleased. "You're not after my forty dollars?"

He shook his head. "I'd settle for another story about the jungle."

The traffic lights changed, but they stayed on the corner, discovering each other in the wavering light of the Schulte Cigar Store.

"Oh, that," she said, after a pause. "I could scare you away if I really tried. I slept in a hut once, with a native woman, and it wasn't until three days later that I discovered that she had leprosy." She felt her nose, gingerly, as if surprised that it was still there. "I didn't catch it, I think."

"What did you do?"

"I went to a doctor and he told me to take a bath."

He took her head in his hands and looked behind her ears. Their bodies were almost touching. "Did you?" he asked, casually.

"That was four years ago," she said, wondering why she was breathing faster. "If I haven't bathed yet it's not going to do much good now." She tried to control her voice. "That's the way I am. Good sense, fine breeding, excellent taste, but slightly disorganized brains. They're

all right when I collect them." It was happening, that something that she couldn't describe. She'd thought so while they were walking, but once his hands touched her in that detached way she knew. Knees trembling, and her feet going hot and cold. All the symptoms, as sure as if they were recorded on charts. If it doesn't move you it doesn't count, whether it's a published poem or a trip through the jungle or a wavering engagement. And now she had walked for less than half an hour through the colorless streets of New York with a big easy-going fellow at her side, and her breath was coming quickly and her feet felt as if they didn't belong to her. That was the way she was. The thing that caused it didn't matter. It was only the effect that counted.

They crossed the street together, walked silently to the next corner, and then she stopped, a few doors off the Avenue. He nodded, as if he had reached the end of a mission. "Wait a second," he said, "before I forget." He reached in his pocket and took out a dollar bill. "I haven't any change. Got a dime?" She found one in her purse and handed it to him. He walked to the curb and hailed the first taxi that came speeding by. "Here you are," he said, handing the money to the startled driver. "Swell ride."

The driver looked at him for a moment, not comprehending, then took the money. "Thanks, buddy," he said. "I don't get it, but I can use the dough." He put the car into gear and drove off slowly, looking back curiously until he reached the heavier traffic at the corner.

Hank took her outstretched hand, then asked, hesitantly, "Is is all right if I kiss you?"

"You ought to get something for your dollar ten." She lifted her head.

He bent down and pressed his lips against hers, then put

his arms around her shoulder and pulled her body close, for just a moment. "It was your dime," he said.

"And worth it, too."

"Can I see you some time? Nights when your ties don't seem too binding?"

"I hope so. Try. I don't know. No harm in phoning. I'm the only Constance Gwynn Rawlings in the phone book." There was that feeling again, knees trembling and her feet going warm and cold. "I know I should say no, but I never do the things I should. So long. It was nice. Honestly, Hank, all sorts of things have happened to me, but I'll swear it's the only taxi ride I didn't have that I'll never forget."

CHAPTER 3

It was three days before Connie saw Martha again. Of course that wasn't so long, but she was surprised that her sister hadn't phoned. You couldn't get in touch with Martha unless she called you. She had no telephone at home, and they didn't like personal calls at her office. So you waited for her, and sometimes you kept on waiting. Three days was long enough, Connie thought, as she lingered in the hallway, even if Martha was angry. Well. There was one way of finding out. She touched her finger to the bell. Martha opened the door, and held out her arms in welcome surprise. "Hello," she said, not angry at all. "Look who's here. We thought you might be wandering around somewhere. Where have you been?"

"You might call a person up once in a while," Connie said. "Just to check up on the dead and missing."

"Come on in. I've been worried about you ever since you and Tarzan walked out on that party."

"So worried you forgot to phone."

"Well, it wasn't as bad as that. I knew you'd show up in a week or two. You always do. Can you stay a while? No dates or anything?"

"Not a thing. I think Dale is annoyed. I haven't even heard from him. He's as bad as you are. What's par for a heartbroken fiancé?"

"He sure was upset, sitting there with only four or five

blondes to soothe him in his grief. I'd be surprised if he remembers that he brought you. Make yourself comfortable. Have you eaten? I can hustle something together."

"I'm stuffed." Connie took off her fur-piece and stroked it gently. "Where's Bax?"

Martha inclined her head toward the kitchen. "Dishes. I think he's getting fond of them. He doesn't let me help."

"I suppose that's just as well." Connie pulled her gloves off thoughtfully. "He wants something that's his job."

Martha nodded, slowly. "Maybe you're right." She motioned to a chair. "Sit down. How're your ads? Any sales coming?" She smiled ruefully. "I don't know why that should interest me. I'm not buying much. I still read the ads, though. It doesn't mean anything. I read the obituaries, too."

Baxter heard them and came into the room. "Hello there," he said, rolling down his sleeves and buttoning them at the cuffs. "How are the lions and tigers today?"

"Hello, counsellor. Fine, fine, I put them all to sleep and tucked their itsy bitsy fangs away for the night."

"Good God," Martha said, "aren't things around here bad enough without your going whimsical on us?"

"Sorry." Connie laughed. "I won't do that again for seven years. It comes over you every now and then, like the plague."

Baxter motioned apologetically in the direction of the kitchen. "Cleaning up a bit," he said. "Like to help out." He started rolling up his sleeves again. "Well, be seeing you. I'll be finished soon." He waved a friendly finger and went back to the little kitchen.

They both watched him in silence. Connie shifted in her chair. "I got a raise," she said, suddenly.

"Did you? Say, that's swell. How much?"

"Five bucks. I get forty now. How's that for advancement? I've been with them only three years. That isn't bad, is it?"

"They don't give five-dollar raises in our place," Martha said. "A dollar here and two dollars there, and when you get all the way up to twenty-eight you can see their worried looks every time you stop to breathe. I wish I could get more money, but I don't know how to go about it. I follow all the rules. I haven't watched a clock in years. What must I do? Sleep with somebody? Nobody's even asked me."

"You wouldn't do it."

"Maybe not, but it's nice to be asked."

"You work so much harder than I do. Writing ads is a cinch. If you don't get a terrific five-word inspiration you swipe it from *Vogue*. Change a word here and there. They seem to think I do pretty good work. It's ridiculous. Why should I get more than you?"

"Your attitude, darling. They know that I need this job. You have confidence. If they don't pay you what you want you'll run off and shoot a buffalo." She let her hands drop. "I don't know. Maybe they like buffaloes."

Connie walked across the room and sat down on the worn stuffed chair. "I've never threatened. I never even asked for a raise. I know what it is. The more you work the less you get. Any economist will tell you that. My boss does half as much as I do and gets twice my salary. My assistant works twice as hard and gets about half. That's the way it is. The office boy is the one that really works and they pay him a handsome thirteen dollars a week. You figure it out. You're the one with brains."

"I see where I cut down production." Martha went over to the candy jar and opened it. It was empty. "Sure. I'm

just the one. I haven't the nerve. I ought to brag and shout and get them to install a real billing department with me at the head, instead of a one-man affair with a rickety typewriter. Other people can do it. You ought to see our sales-manager. He's so tied up in systems and cards and assistants that he hasn't time for a minute's work. Ha. Not me. It takes more guts than I can gather together. That's the way you get when the family is dependent on you." She glanced toward the kitchen.

"How is he?" Connie asked, dropping her voice.

Martha shrugged. "Fair. About the same. Sweet. It's nine years now. I'm not looking for miracles."

Connie got up and went over to her. "Things can change. We're alive, healthy. Next year we may be sitting on top of the world."

Martha shook her head. "Maybe others, but not us. We're licked. Baxter is down to the yes-sir-thank-you-sir stage. It's a long road back from there."

Connie went to the window and looked out at the shadows in the alley. "I'm coming to live here," she said, not turning to face Martha.

"You are not."

"Listen, I'm grown up. I know what I want. I'm lonely. I'm sick of living alone."

"Get yourself a man. Somebody to love, honor, and support you. I suppose there are people like that."

"I don't take advice," Connie said. "You know that."

"You sure listened to me in the past," Martha said, grimly. "I *did* forbid you to go cannibal hunting, didn't I? You were all right. You just went."

Connie came over to Martha and stood before her. "We can move into that three-room place across the hall. We won't have to buy a thing. I have more stuff than we need.

The rent won't be more than about forty or forty-five dollars. Why shouldn't we? We've grown up together. What sense is there in having two separate places?" She sat down on the edge of the bench and waited. Martha was staring silently at the floor. "I have no lease. I'll give them notice at the end of the month."

Martha lifted her head. "Go ahead. Make me seem bitter. You know how I feel, all choked up inside. Go ahead. Have me crying." She opened her purse and took out her handkerchief. "I'm not going to dump part of this on you," she said, passionately. "We're getting along. We don't have caviar, but we pay our bills. This is our job. I can fight. If I couldn't I'd have found a way out long ago. The old lady jumped or fell from the twelfth story. Not yet. We can hang on."

"I'm sorry," Connie said, uneasily. "I didn't mean to upset you. I wanted to help."

"Don't I know it?" Martha started to put out her hand, tenderly, then drew it back. "Do you think I'm bawling you out?" she said, her tone gentle. "Good God, kid, I have to scold or I'll break down and weep all over the place. We don't have to put on an act, do we? We were dragged up together. That spring suit last year. Just your damned luck it was a size too large, and no exchanges of course, and goody-goody it just fit sister dear. You don't have to do it. Why can't I say you're swell to my own sister?"

"Oh, stop it. I had more money than you. What was so wonderful about it? Sure it was an act. I knew you knew." She shrugged. "It made it easier all around."

"No more," Martha said, waving a warning hand. "Little things, perhaps, but no clothes. I wouldn't even take the little things, but I know it makes you happy. We get

by. We're a long ways from begging. We don't even like caviar. I'd rather have spaghetti."

"English marmalade. I can still bring that."

Martha smiled softly. "A jar a month. No more. We spread it thin. Our luxury. Upper-class stuff. But nothing else. Nothing. Don't tangle up your life in ours. It won't be easy to get yourself out again. You have to learn to take things. I have my outlets. Every now and then I take a nice clean dish and slam it up against the wall. Makes me feel better for a while. Some day I'll do it with a typewriter. Won't that be something! Boy, a strait-jacket for Miss Cunningham, she's grown violent again, dropping sales-managers out of the window! Gets the sidewalk all messy." She laughed now, the tension gone. "Don't mind me. I get this way once in a while."

Connie looked at her for a second and then started laughing too. "I don't know what we're laughing at. It isn't even funny."

Martha watched the soft face, soft and young, light and happy. The kid sister. The baby. Still the baby. Twelve years younger than Martha, and acting as if she were her great-aunt. "As long as we can laugh," she said. "Later on we can wonder why. I suppose if I got my innermost desires I'd sit back and weep."

"You have to go to work on desires," Connie said. "You never get them by ignoring them."

"Don't mind me. It's all too vague. I've put them aside long ago."

"A job," Connie said. "I mean for Bax."

"Sure. Why not? He's a human being."

"There's something deeper, isn't there?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. At a certain age you start putting ridiculous notions out of your mind."

"I thought so," Connie said. "A baby!"

Martha smiled. "Say, there's no law against dreaming. After all, we've been married fifteen years. And that adorable Italian baby next door." Her face lit up. "Little Petie. His mother lets me hold him every now and then. God, do I go sappy! I can't believe it. An old war-horse like me. Well. Maybe it's wrong to dream."

"Can I talk to you?" Connie said. "Seriously, man to man, no frills or fancy phrases? Why can't I live here? Why can't I help you? Look. I have money in the bank. What good is it to me? Last time I went there they added my interest. Sixty-two cents. What am I supposed to do? Hoard my gold, pile sixty-two cents upon sixty-two cents until I can retire and live in luxury? Isn't it a bit silly? I'm ashamed of it, frankly. Why can't I do my daily good deed right here? I'll move in and you can save a bit and I'll take a half interest in the baby. What's wrong with that?"

"You go have your own babies. I'd be a fine one to wrap my problems around you and tie you so that you'd never get out. What would happen? Just park yourself here and see if you ever get away. I know. You'll be stuck for the rest of your natural life. I wouldn't do that to you. I wouldn't do it to anybody. I'm not borrowing crutches that I'll have to lean on always. Save your sixty-two cents. Some day you'll want a fur coat or an operation. Maybe you'll get married. Even engaged girls get married." She got up suddenly and went to the door of the kitchen. Baxter was sitting on one of the painted chairs, a towel across his knees. "Finished?" she said. "I want to make some tea."

"I'm all through. Didn't want to disturb you girls. I was just sitting."

Connie came to the door. "I don't want anything. I was just going to leave anyhow."

"So soon?" Baxter said. "You two didn't scrap, did you?"

"How could I scrap with her?" Martha said. "She's a scatter-brained pup. But nice. A nice scatter-brained pup."

"She is at that." Baxter smiled.

"So long," Connie said. "Let me know if you change your mind."

They took her to the door and waved to her as she went down the dark steps. Then they went back into the apartment and Baxter locked the door. Martha nodded, old thoughts running through her mind. "Nice people. That's what mother used to say about the Rawlingses. Nice people."

"Sure they are," he agreed.

"Sure they are," she repeated. "I hope I have a cigarette." She fumbled in her purse and found a pack almost empty. She lit one and took long deep puffs, letting the smoke spread before her like a cloud, and she sat there, staring at it as if it could furnish some clue to her future. After a while she put the cigarette out, and started snapping out the lights, preparatory to going to bed. Nice people, the Rawlingses were. Everybody said so. She held her head up, still proud, still fighting. Wasn't she one of them?

CHAPTER 4

You stumble through life, grappling with the problems that block your path, emerging slightly dishevelled but with a weak smile of triumph as you gain your immediate objective and close your eyes to the greater obstacles ahead. If it wasn't Martha it was Dale. Nations crumble, the suffering of mankind in all lands continues unabated, but you go on fretting about the things nearest to your own heart. There isn't room for all the world, so you stick to the tiny portion of it that is you. Little things, only little things. Dale forgets to call you, or your last finger-wave came out wrong, or Dale neglected to hold a door for you, and your well-oiled world slips a trifle, leaving you breathless and discouraged, leaving you wondering.

Wondering. Sometimes you had to pick up the odd bits of your romance and piece them together to see if they still fit. Dale was as handsome as ever, with his lovely violet eyes and his features small and even, and Dale was still bright and intense, sincere in his work and colossal in his ego. But that was Dale. Somewhere there was a license, neatly engraved and filled out in flowing letters, or perhaps Dale had discarded it along with his wavering desires. There shouldn't be any doubt about love. It should be there, pounding, insisting, never faltering. If it wasn't all that it wasn't love. Or so she had been led to believe.

She'd waited a week for his call, and then when he did call he'd merely said, "Doing anything tomorrow, Connie? No? I'll drop over. About eight." Just like that. Why hadn't he been furious at the way she'd run off that evening? Why hadn't he been tender and sweet? Why had he been just another man calling a girl, arranging an ordinary appointment just as thousands of others were doing all over the world? That was Dale. Only one thing was important to him, and that was himself. You could tell that about his lateness. They'd had it all out once, and of course she had gotten nowhere. Waiting on a cold corner, her feet nearly frozen, for more than an hour, and then his casual acceptance of it, with never a word of regret . . . "You place too much importance on time," he had said, lecturing her while she tried to control her anger. "Time. Hours. Days. What difference does it make? It's a small part of a lifetime, of eternity. Forget it. What would we have done with an hour? Wasted it in silly chatter."

"I'm a fool. I shouldn't have waited. I was afraid something had happened to you."

"Something did. An inspiration. I typed four swell pages. I don't know why I stopped."

"I'm sorry you did," she'd said, bitterly. "I don't want you."

"Connie, you'll have to learn to accept things about me. I'm not going to change. I don't rush around madly trying to be on time. It's not important to me."

"It's important to me."

"Nonsense. Minutes mean nothing to you. Days mean less. You're putting in time, wasting it. But you want to start your wasting promptly. Is there any sense to that? I see people doing the damndest things to make time pass, crossword puzzles or watching a motorist change a tire,

silly, stupid, but they'll throw a fit if you keep them waiting fourteen seconds."

"I'm cold," she had said. "My feet are frozen. I'm shaking all over. I'm going to be sick."

"Nonsense. After this we'll meet at one of our apartments. It *is* foolish standing out there in the cold." That was the way he handled their problems. Just her luck she didn't get sick, so even that made him right. He wouldn't change, not for her or for the world. He was Dale Edwin, an individual. And now he would be late as usual, and she would accept it as she always did. Still, she was ready, waiting, at eight, because that was the way she was.

He came at nine. "Hello," he said. "I'm early."

"For you," she said.

"For me. If I get here the right day I'm doing all right. The Edwin philosophy. Does it rate a kiss?" He kissed her lightly, then stepped back to look at her. "Dolled up?"

She shook her head. "Clean. I wash evenings, date or no."

"You look nice," he said, as if he were talking about the weather. There was something about his ego that made you admire it. It was an ego of integrity, about his work only, not about his looks or his intelligence or the way women went silly in his presence. He was a playwright, and that would stay with him until his dying day, successful or a dismal flop. He believed in himself, wholly, sincerely, implicitly. And after all, he backed his belief. Once he had had a job, a nice comfortable job in a company owned by his uncle, and the road to success had been pleasantly smoothed for him. He'd given that up, all of it, and was grinding out a meagre existence in the field that was important to him. You had to give him credit for that.

He stood near her, not sure of their movements. "We

almost went to a show," he said. "Almost. I thought I could wangle a couple of passes out of somebody. It didn't work. What do we do, walk and talk, or stay home and neck?"

"Don't you remember?" she said. "I'm the girl who doesn't neck."

"Oh, yes," he said, solemnly. "You're the one. I knew there was one. I must keep it straight. What do you do?"

"Walk," she said uncomfortably, "or talk. Or listen. I can whistle, too. I get off pitch."

"Never mind. All sorts of accomplishments, except the simplest. And, I may say, the most diverting."

"I suppose I've missed something."

"Haven't you, though. And you're a bit old to start learning."

She could feel her body stiffen. Go ahead. Hurt me. Keep prodding. That's our relationship, isn't it? "Is there a prescribed age?" she asked.

"Sure," he said, amused at her discomfort. "Seven. Eight. In some retarded cases even nine. After that we lose hope."

"I see where I stand." She went to the closet and got her hat. "I think we'd better walk. Mingle with the life and gayety and hamburgers on Fourteenth Street. There's a Penny Arcade with the filthiest pictures. Ladies in the raw, possibly some of your friends who started at the proper age. Maybe they'll furnish an outlet for you."

He stood there, smiling. "I've seen the pictures. They're not so hot. I wasted six cents. I'd like to go out, though. Been cooped up all day. I was working fine when I stopped to come over here." He turned the pages of a magazine as she got into her coat. "We'll look around. There's always something on Fourteenth Street. Street magicians, and

broken-down actors selling razor-blades. All sorts of novelties. Maybe we can find room for a shop-worn playwright."

She closed the door behind them. "Are you really working so hard?" she asked, as they reached the street. "How are you getting along?"

"Fine. Fine. Some good stuff." He nodded, sure of himself. "I need encouragement. Something to bolster me. I mean something besides my own pats on the back. Obie liked my last play. He's stricter than hell, too. Good critic. Knows his stuff. And he liked it. But he can't place it. He goes around peddling it as if it were a pound of fish. There's so much crap on Broadway, and they won't look at a fine play by one Dale Edwin."

"Has he any hope? Any prospects?"

"Hope? That's all we have these days. It's in Harkover's office now. You know, J. C. Harkover, God's own gift to the theatre."

"Does he like it?" Connie asked, anxiously.

"How can we tell? He hasn't read it yet. He takes his own sweet time. Weeks, months. What difference does it make to him?"

She tried to comfort him by patting his arm. "You'll get there. I know. I have confidence in you."

"Good girl. You and me, against the world. Hell. What I write is good. That's all that matters. I know it's good. I can tell, just as if some one else had written it. I can judge. It's there, all right. I know."

She watched him out of the corner of her eyes. He slouched as he walked, as if his clothes were too heavy for him. His face was solemn when he talked about his work, all trace of flippancy gone. That was the way she liked him.

"Say," he said, suddenly, "got a cigarette?"

She opened her purse and offered him the pack. He took one, looked at it, then shook his head. "Why do women smoke Chesterfields?"

"Sorry," she said. "What brand?"

"Camels, if it's all the same to you."

"I'll try to remember," she said, meekly. Then a wave of annoyance swept over her. "You wouldn't—" she started, icily, "—I mean, there *are* stands in New York. You step right up to one and buy a pack. Camels or anything. If there's any trouble just mention my name."

"Trouble?" He smiled faintly. "I have more trouble than that man who had a wife and a mistress and a note at the bank, all thirty days overdue. These cigar-stands are unreasonable. They expect you to pay."

"Oh." She was embarrassed, sorry about her sarcasm. "I didn't know. Broke as that?"

"Just broke. At the moment. It's not new with me. I get that way every now and then. I wrote an article for *The Nation*. If they take it there may be a ten-spot in it. Nine, after Obie's commission. Gold on the horizon."

She opened her purse and fingered the cigarettes. "Take them," she said, with an effort. "I won't be smoking any more tonight."

He took the pack and slipped them into his pocket. "Thanks," he said, as if it weren't much of a favor.

That meant he was hungry. He would buy cigarettes before food. And he hadn't a cigarette. She wondered if he would accept a meal from her. No harm in trying. Down the street a large electric sign, 'EAT,' kept flashing, on and off. She hesitated as they approached it. It was a counter-place, and a smaller sign in the window said, 'The best food money can buy'. "Look," she said, "I'm hungry. Want to stop and have a bite? My treat."

"No," he said. "I don't mind bumming cigarettes. No

meals, though. Don't you worry about me. Nobody else does."

She faced him frankly. "I'm not good at subterfuge. Come on, man to man. I'll blow you to a cheap meal now, and when you get your nine dollars you'll owe me a good dinner."

He thought for a moment. "That's fair. You're getting better odds than you would on a horse."

"I'm progressing," she said, cheerily. "A short while ago I hadn't reached the eight-year level."

"That was emotionally. I never criticized your acumen. You're all right, Connie."

"Thanks." He swung the door open and went in ahead of her. She caught it as it started to close, and followed him, her face red. He'd always do things like that. He strode to one of the stools and sat down at the counter, then turned to look for her. The place was almost empty. She sat next to him and they waited meekly for the counter-man. He shuffled over to them and handed them a spotted menu.

"Say," Dale said, "is there a wash-room here?"

"The John?" He jerked his head toward the corner, then grinned at Connie, who suddenly found the menu absorbing. Dale slid off his stool without a word. The counter-man looked toward her a few times, but she kept her head down. He doesn't have to do it, she thought, meaning Dale. Slam doors in your face and leave you alone and embarrassed, as if you were naked in the eyes of this staring idiot. He can think of me every now and then, and do nice things, little things, to make me happier, to show that he likes being with me.

But of course he didn't. He came back, his face shining. "Believe it or not," he said, "I merely wanted to wash."

"You don't have to explain. It isn't important." She held out the menu to him.

He waved it away. "Ham and eggs. These places have good ham and eggs and coffee. If you get anything else you're tempting Providence. Hey," he called, "ham and eggs, and draw one." He sat there, drumming on the counter.

She picked up the menu and studied it, waiting. Finally she said, "I'll have a cup of coffee."

"Coffee? Hey. Draw two."

"Nice of you to remember me. I'm the girl that came in with you." She almost said, The girl that's paying the check.

"Sorry." That was all. That was the most you'd ever get out of Dale in the way of apology.

They watched the counter-man flip the eggs into his pan and hold them over the flame. He tossed them expertly into a plate and pushed it along the counter to Dale. Then he slid the two cups of coffee so that they stopped in front of them.

"Nice work," she said, anxious to relieve the tension.

"They take courses in that. At Cornell, I think, or maybe Yale."

"Go ahead," she urged. "Eat while it's hot."

He buttered his bread and ate eagerly, mopping up the loose bits of egg with the soft bread. "Food is nothing," he said, as he ate. "It's a symbol of stuffiness, the badge of the bourgeoisie. You get too much of it or not enough, depending on your pocketbook instead of your needs. You wouldn't stuff your automobile with champagne just because you'd made a killing in Wall Street. No. You wouldn't ruin a perfectly good car. Stomachs are different." He motioned for more bread. "Good ham and eggs. You're a sweet girl, Connie."

"Sure I am, while I feed you."

"No. Or maybe. I don't know. Was I hungry the night I proposed?"

She sat up eagerly. "Then you do remember?"

He patted her hand. "Connie. I'm not as bad as all that. I think about it as much as you do. I've made all sorts of propositions to girls in my life, some respectable and some just propositions, but I'd never proposed before. It's funny. We'd be safely married now, if it weren't for that five-day wait in Greenwich. I wonder why they do that? They shouldn't stifle love's eager surge. Should they?"

She turned away, unable to answer. Love's eager surge. Lines from his play. If he felt contrite about it, they could go back. But never a word about that.

He didn't notice. How could he tell that she was upset? "I'll never forget the way you slapped my face the first time I cracked wise to you. What did I say? It couldn't have been so bad. I save my snappy bits for later on. Probably something my maiden aunt told me. Do you remember?"

"I remember," she said, tensely. "It wasn't the remark. You had a cute little gesture to illustrate the joke. I don't let strange hands wander over my body."

"Oh, yes." He laughed. "Something about the tailor rubbing out the marks for the patch pockets." He touched his cheek. "It was some sock. But worth it. The awakening of love."

"I don't like it," she said, in a low voice. "I can't help it. I don't like it."

"We're engaged now, you know. We can talk about storks and night-shirts and things you see in the drug-store windows."

"Dale. I suppose I'll change. I try. I really do. Something goes cold inside of me. What can I do? It's heredity, I know. We come from a long line of virgins. One generation isn't enough to change it."

"That's silly," he said, dismissing the subject. "You're you. I'm not interested in refrigerated ancestors. You can warm up plenty. Let yourself go. Some day. Some day." He motioned to the counter-man. "Another coffee." He drank it slowly, watching her over the top of his cup. "Ah," he said, "that's good. The second cup is always better than the first." He stood up and stretched. "It's silly to stay hungry when you can have all this for fifty cents."

She got up too. "Feel better?"

"Fine." He took the pack of cigarettes she had given him and put one in his mouth. Then he remembered and offered her one. She shook her head, knowing, foolishly, that she wanted one. But he hadn't offered it to her first.

She took the check and paid it at the cashier's desk, then slipped back and left a dime on the counter. Dale was outside, waiting for her. He was watching the silver moon that hung loosely over the Metropolitan Life Building. "I'm all pepped up," he said. "You know what I'd like to do?"

"What?" she said, eagerly.

"Get back to work." His head was up, his eyes alight. "I feel things now. Feel them surging through me. That's when I can write. It's different when you sit down at an empty typewriter. I'm full of words now." He put his hand over hers. "Connie. I'm going to do it. What do you say? Come home with me? You sit around and help and criticize?"

"No." It wasn't what she wanted. A whole week of

loafing, and then the great urge must come in the few minutes that he spent with her. "Go ahead. I'll go home. I have a headache."

"Sure you don't mind?"

She shook her head, her lips tight. "Go ahead."

"O. K. Will you get home all right?"

"I'll take the bus." He leaned over to kiss her, but she must have turned her head, unconsciously, because it turned out to be merely a peck at her cheek.

"So long," he said. "I'll phone you." He walked away, turning once to wave. "Oh," he called, "thanks."

And there you are. An evening with your loved one, the one whom you some day will marry, and won't that be fun! It was his literary integrity, one of the things about him that she admired, popping to the fore. But why can't it assert itself on Tuesdays at high noon, or at seven A.M. on Thursdays? Isn't that carrying things a little too far? Where does integrity stop and selfishness begin?

She waited at the corner, realizing that she really had a headache. Go ahead, my sweet, go write your God-damned play that will be still-born to the end of your days. Somewhere, some time, you can find a tiny crevice in that full life for your lady-love, so that she can have a precious hour with you, or perhaps an evening. If it isn't asking too much. A whole evening, and you will be on time, washed and clean and ready, and you will have your own cigarettes, and you will hold the door as I march proudly through, and all the neighbors will see and applaud, for you will be showing your love in little ways, little ways. You will stop at Union Square Park and pick a clumsy handful of asters, and you will hand them to me with a dainty speech, and you will kiss me before you ask about the weather, and oh my love, oh my dearest love, we will

have an evening together that will go down in history as the sweetest of all evenings.

She lifted her finger for the bus, and as she got on she opened her purse for a nickel, and while she was at it she took out her handkerchief and rubbed at her eyes, at a bit of dust that must have blown in while she was standing there, waiting and dreaming.

CHAPTER 5

A sporting-goods shop, or is it a shoppe? But how quaint! Just a minute, lady, it may not be the best way in the world of earning a living, but it's a long ways from the worst. We all have dreams, and we have to hide them, because we all learn funny customs when we're young, eating and sleeping, and wearing clothes to warm the body, and the tradesmen have the annoying habit of expecting you to pay for these trifling luxuries. So you do what you can, and if you buy a baseball bat for forty cents and sell it for sixty-five, why, there's a whole quarter in the treasury that didn't bloom there before. Enough of them and you can pay the rent, and after that whatever you have left over is your own.

Hank Brady, Sports. But at college they told you you were an engineer. Build, get out into the world and build. We give you only the beginnings at school, and the rest is up to you. Sure it is. But nobody gives you the chance, and you can't go around building dams with twenty dollars in your pocket. Build. Do things, big things, important things, help people, make them proud of you. Sure. Stand behind a counter, springing to attention each time the door opened, and if you or you or you walk in with a quarter, plus a penny for the tax, the great Brady himself would give you a handball, or a pair of tennis socks, and if you had any sense you wouldn't ask him about the far-away look in his eyes.

Talk about your post-war babies. How about your post-depression college men? What did they (the ones without the wealthy fathers) have to look forward to? Not that we aren't better off than many of them, but it took years to get this trifling foothold, and now that we have it, what have we? Buy things and sell them, the only comfort being that while you don't ease the pains of an aching world, at least you don't make them any worse. But your dreams, you who were going to do things . . .

They used to stand in line for our graduates. Yes, they did, the big shots from the larger corporations, begging for lads for China, for the Argentine, all over the world, but that was before nineteen thirty. Later, the same big shots were peering nervously into their pay envelopes, wondering when the pink slip would strike them. Your diploma, young man, genuine sheepskin, and if things don't pick up soon you can try it between two slices of bread. Bridges in China, and new roads, new cities, in the heart of Africa! No. No. Not this year, my boy, we're glad if we can keep body and soul together.

"Look, Mister," he had said, "I need a job. Any sort of job."

The man's face was still before him, tired, hopeless. "I'm letting men go that have been with me twelve years. Men with families. What can I do?"

Anybody that wants work can get a job. Phrases spread around, and people get to believe them. How about these twelve-year men with families? They want to work, don't they? *I* want to work. God. I expect to eat. My father never owned a bank in Pittsburgh. I don't care what I do. I want a job.

"Sure. You can fill out an application if you think it'll do any good. We don't even file them any more. Name,

and age, and education, and after you leave we heave them into the waste-paper basket. We're up against it. Maybe we'll meet next week's payroll and maybe we won't. We're going through something, son, and don't you forget it."

No. He wouldn't forget it. There are things that stay with you always. He was Hank Brady, and when he stepped to the rostrum to receive his diploma the place rocked with cheers. Bad. It's bad to make the headlines when you're young. You get illusions, and then you discover you're an ordinary human being, like millions of others. They shouldn't build you up. It makes the let-down that much worse. Cheering thousands, the hum that grew to a roar, the white lines melting under your long strides. Touchdown! Touchdown! Brady! Brady! A bit of skill, a bit of luck, and the newspapers played it all over the place.

It should go on, the excitement, the glamour, but now he was Mr. Brady, adding up the bills after business hours and remembering to lock the window in the rear when he closed up for the night. Live again, Brady, get the feeling of the wind in your face, mingle with people, take life apart and see what makes it go. Bum your way across the country, work in the fields, in the mines, you were somebody when you let your muscles work for you, do it again, do it now. But you have to eat, meanwhile, and sleep, and there may not be much allure in an ordinary shop, but it does keep you alive. Yes, Madam, real pigskin from a pedigreed pig, guaranteed not to warp or shrink or fade, just the football for a woman of your build—oh, for your boy, well, with this excellent ball and years of practice he'll be All-American, God help him. Four dollars and seventeen cents, plus the tax, and thank you, Madam, thank you. Ho hum, another day, and remarkably similar

to yesterday and the day before that, if I may be permitted to say so.

He sat on the counter and let his long legs dangle to the floor. It would be nice to call Connie, if he could conquer that corner of himself that might have been his conscience. She was right. If it doesn't move you it doesn't count. Football or jungles or marriage or death, what difference do they all make unless they do something to you, away down deep? Look, Connie, he could say (if he called) you can hang up if you want to, or tell me to go to hell, but there's no harm in trying, is there? You said so yourself, keep trying and maybe I'll catch you in the right mood. I don't go around pestering women, women on the verge of marriage (are you, Connie?) but this is different. We have something for each other. There's something deep, deep, you know it and so do I.

He picked up the phone and started to spin the dial. Then he changed his mind and put it down again and leaned back, arms outstretched. It was a moment, and you don't want to let moments die. The Sugar Bowl was packed solid that day, row after row of white shirts and colored dresses, moving, swaying in the breeze like fields of colored corn. It wasn't much of a game, too tight, both teams too well-drilled on defense, and the audience yelled their heads off on a five-yard run-back of a kick. Then came the play. Third quarter, no score, and it looked as if there never would be any, and then they tried K-T-69, from midfield, Hank tearing down as if to run right over the defensive back, stopping in his tracks to draw him in, then the quick cut to get a step on him, an old basketball trick, the faked cut-back, and it worked. If Mossy would toss it high enough he could take it in full stride—good old Mossy, he could hang that ball on a peg at forty yards—a

last-second stretch, knowing he could make it, and the thrill as the ball nestled against his finger-tips—ah, that was good, that was a glorious feeling, even now his body got warm all over as it came back to him, the yell that went up from the thousands of throats, the colors swaying as in anguish or ecstasy, a moment that he never wanted to end.

And here he was. Three years ago he had taken down most of the clippings. They stared at you too brazenly from their plain walnut frame. That was over. There were new teams, new heroes. Now he was a staid businessman who had to fasten windows and cut down on desserts. Hank Brady, Sports. At least it was a field he understood, and he was his own boss. Plug along, and forget your dreams. Headlines. They build you up, up, and then they drop you, and after that things seem empty. He should be out doing things, things that meant life or death or glory or progress, anything that might help him sit back at the end of a day, tired, spent, happy. The urge comes back, or perhaps it has never left you, and you want to be on your way.

He could lead men. Quietly, not through blustering or shouting, but by gaining their confidence, being part of them, one of them. The best captain I ever had, the coach said. The boys'd go to hell and back for him. Well, what does a leader do when he hasn't a soul to lead? Including himself. Why? There were plenty that needed leadership, men like his father, giving up their lives in order to live, and never learning why. Look, men, I'm one of you, look at my hands, my father poured his life into the coal mines at Rhodora, and I want to keep you from doing the same. You and your son and your son's sons.

But he wouldn't do it. He was too smug, he with his leather-cushioned chair and his ten-cent cigar, what did he have to worry about? Two more years and his store would

be free and clear, and by that time any spark he had ever had would be gone, so that he could sit back and grow fat, and hand down bits of advice to the younger generation. Fight, boys, he would say, fight for the right and blah blah blah, but fight. Me? I'm too old, fellows, yes, and I'm putting on weight, but old Brady is right back of you, don't forget that. I was captain of the team once, a leader of men.

"College, Hank," his mother had said, a far-away look in her eyes. "It was your father's dream to send you through college. Now I don't know if we can make it."

"Sure we can," he had said, towering over her, even at seventeen. "Look. Athletic scholarships." He spread the offers before her.

"I don't understand it. It won't interfere with your learning? This football business?"

"They all do it. Free tuition and a cinchy job. You take the regular courses. Do you know which college I want?"

She looked the papers over critically. "This one."

"How did you know?" he asked, surprised.

"The Engineers. Don't I know my boy? Engineers. Get out and build things. You were that way as a baby. Building, building, always building. You'll be a great engineer, my son. I know."

Well, you don't do much engineering in a sporting-goods store, Mom, but maybe, some day, if I haven't forgotten all I've learned. It slips away from you, you know, and it may take a lot of cramming to bring it back.

I tried, Mom. I tried everywhere. Nice young fellow, yes, I went to Carnegie Tech myself, but these times, God, man, I have to let my own relatives go. Fine, fine, and go and eat your press clippings. Wait. It's an idea. If we

can't get a job we'll coach. Just for a season or so, until things pick up a bit. Coach. Where? They're all hanging on this season. Not a college job open anywhere. Or prep school. Or kindergarten. You have to eat. You've been doing it for twenty-one years and you'd hate to stop now. Life-guard? Sure. Permanent? Absolutely, right through the months of July and August, and if you can find anything more permanent than that these days you're doing all right.

"My name's Smythe," the energetic little man had said. "Obie Smythe. Used to take shows on tour. Shot to hell. Tried basketball last year. No so bad. I'm getting a Collegiate All-Star bunch this season. Fellows with football reputations."

"I was All-American on the *World-Telegram* team," Hank said. "Second team in the *Sun* and *Colliers*."

"I have the pedigree. Six men and a manager. Pay our own expenses and split seven ways. O.K.?"

"How much is in it?"

"We won't get rich. I figure four games a week through the season. Should average thirty-forty bucks a man each week. Hell. It's better than starving."

Much better. Tour the country like a bunch of damned chorus-girls, with one-night stands and cancelled appearances, making 'em close for the home crowd and dropping games to get return engagements. The high salary days of basketball were over, but sometimes they got as much as twenty dollars each for a big game, and they stretched the season from October to April. Slim pickings at the end, five bucks sometimes in April, but you liked to hang on until the summer-time, so you could be life-guard or athletic director at one of the beaches or summer resorts.

Each year was going to be the last, so that you could get

your regular life under way, but then somehow you hadn't landed anything and you were glad when it was time to dig the old shirts out of your closet, the red shirts with white 'ALL STARS' across the bosom, and start troupng again. Four years of that, and then Obie quits to go back to the show business, and you find you've slowed up a bit, and besides you're tired of the grind of it, so you find a job in one of the firms that manufactures sporting-goods, and after a year or so of that you drift into running this store of your own. Hank Brady, Sports.

He was thirty now, nine years out of college. Nine years. What had he done with his life? Brady, who was going to be a leader of men. He'd eaten and slept and clothed his body, putting in time, like a lifer in prison. Marking off days on a calendar, watching one's self grow older. But he *had* tasted life, *had* seen his name in headlines. He wasn't going to settle back like that. He *would* do something, some time, as soon as he got squared around and paid off the mortgage on these damned fixtures. Maybe when things got running smoothly he could get somebody to manage the place and get going, get under way, God knows where, but out of it all, grapple with life and learn what it's all about. You're living in the greatest country in the world, and all you know about it is that some of the states are green on the map, and some pink and some yellow. There's more to it than that. You read, papers and books and magazines, and you learn only what the author wants you to know. You must find out for yourself, join the masses and see how they think and live, visit their homes and live their lives, get to know the people by being one of them.

It's hard, alone. You need somebody, somebody with guts, somebody like Connie. She could do it. They could

do it together. She had the stuff. They could mean something to each other. More than she realized. He would have to tell her. Let her know, before it was too late, before she was married to that Dale fellow, that pretty boy who could tie you up in knots with his flow of words. That's what must have fooled Connie, his words, his smooth words, because she didn't seem the sort that would go for wavy hair and a fancy line. She looked like a steak-and-potatoes girl, a girl who wouldn't turn a fellow down because his jaw stuck out a bit.

He had her number right on the pad before him. Come on, get up, do something, start moving if you're ever going to get any place. Connie could be the starting point. He was still young. Not for basketball, maybe, but for life. He could do things. Something. Anything. Crusade (for what?) revolt (where and what against?) help (how? how?) anything, anything, don't let your body ossify, don't grow old sitting and staring into space, don't let your blood turn to water. Kick over your desk, join the Marines, blow up a bank, do something, anything to show that you're still alive. Ha. Some day, some day we'll do all that and more, but just now there's a customer coming into the store. Yes, Madam, we have some very fine exercisers, so Junior's putting on too much weight, you wouldn't consider cutting down on his food, no, well, this is an excellent model, I use it myself, oh no, Madam, we handle nothing that's made in Japan, that will be two dollars and a half, plus the sales tax. You know, the tax for the unemployed. Five cents. It is a nuisance, isn't it? Good day, Madam, and thank you, Madam.

Brady. Yea, Brady. Touchdown, touchdown.

He stood there as the door closed, running his fingers through his straight thick hair. Strong fingers, big hands,

fingers that could tear a telephone book in half, or a deck of cards, and here he was, writing sales slips, gathering callouses on his back-side, smiling and bowing and agreeing from early morning till late at night. Oh, God, if this is living! He reached for the telephone and spun the dial, and this time he waited until there was an answer. "Miss Rawlings," he said. "Oh, hello there. This is Hank Brady. Remember? . . . I had the feeling that it was the right moment . . . That's what you said . . . Well . . . I knew it. I knew I was right . . . You tell me . . . Tuesday? Sure, Tuesday's fine. We'll do something exciting. Maybe take in a movie . . . O. K. then . . . So long." He let the telephone slip into its rack, and sat there for a moment, wondering why his heart was pounding. Then he went into the back room and fastened the window before closing up for the night.

CHAPTER 6

BAXTER was in his house clothes when Martha came home, just as he always was. He wore a pair of baggy trousers spotted with paint, and a worn tennis shirt, and shoes that were giving way at the seams. Some day he would hear the rattle of her keys and he would spring to the door and hold it open for her, head erect and body straight, and he would be wearing his new suit and a clean shirt and his blue tie, just to show her that he was still a human being and that his pride was not completely gone. But of course he had to conserve his clothes.

They were having stew. There was no doubt about that. The smell filtered out into the hall to greet you and to mingle with the smells from the other apartments. She knew their stew. It was always the same. Easy on the meat, boys, and don't spare the onions. Onions were all right, sizzling and crackling atop of a juicy sirloin steak, but not slinking softly in the recesses of a day-old stew. Steak! They hadn't had steak for a long while.

"Hello there," he called from the tiny kitchen, turning as he moved the pot on the stove.

"Hello," she said, trying to sound cheery. "How're you doing?"

"Pretty good. Stew tonight."

"I thought so. We didn't quite finish yesterday's."

"Be ready in a shake. Tired?"

She put her coat in the closet. "Sort of." There was no

reason to be tired. It was only a day's work. She was glad she had that. Last year, when things were slow, she'd been badly worried. It wasn't the work as much as the mental strain. Typing bills, all more or less the same, and after about six or seven hours your back starts to hurt and you wonder how long you can keep it up. Not the hours or the weeks, but the years, you can't help wondering about the long years ahead of you.

Last year things were easier, but she'd been more tired then than now. Worry did that. They could have consolidated jobs, because one of the stenographers who wasn't so busy could have taken over her billing. That would have saved a salary. If Martha thought of it, surely the efficient officers around the place must have, and probably they were just getting around to it when things seemed to pick up, and now she was busy all day long, tired at night but happy in the knowledge that her job was safe.

Baxter made the light under the stew smaller and came over to her and kissed her. "Look," he said, holding some dollar bills before her. "Three bucks. That's not bad for an afternoon. Three summonses, three bucks. That's earning at the rate of six dollars a day. Thirty-six dollars a week. If I could get the work. I might not get another one all week, though. That's the way it goes."

"Who gave you those? Arlington?"

He nodded. "Rah, rah, rah, Harvard. Maybe college chums are some use after all. Too bad I can't get a few more. Most of my class-mates are out of town. There's just Arlington, and one or two others. Funny, how easy it is sometimes. They just accept service and say O. K. Even thank you. I had a funny one today. One of those alimony things. They always try to duck that. I waited outside his office and when he came out I shook hands with

him and I said, As I live, Jimmy Baxter, how are you Jim? Got me wrong, he said, my name's Johnson. Oh, Mr. Johnson, I said, something for you. You just have to touch them with it, you know. He took it all right."

"All for a dollar," she said.

"Sometimes they come easier. I know a fellow who walks into an insurance company with forty at a time. Forty bucks! They have a special man for accepting them. Wish I could get something like that."

Wishing, wishing. Once he had amounted to something. A bright young lawyer with a real future, holding down an important job with one of the big firms, a firm with seven names across the letterhead, and Martha and Baxter used to look at it and try to figure where they would put the Cunningham. Those long names had to have rhythm, and you couldn't slap a new partner's name in any old place. About third from the end, they thought, that would be nice, and a fine dignified old name it was too. But the depression hit that firm awfully hard, and finally they had to let Baxter go, after a few of the fancy names had gone too. But that was nine years ago, and other people had mended since then, but something had happened to Baxter and he would never be right again. Wishing. Hoping. And doing nothing. Even his wishes were timid, reserved. Forty summonses for forty dollars. As long as you're wishing you might as well wish for bigger things.

She had an upset feeling inside. The smell was getting her. That stew. If she ate it she would be sick. The odor seemed to seep right through you, so that you couldn't ignore it. "I thought I was hungry," she said. "Now I don't feel like eating."

He was at her side, solicitous. "What's the matter, Martha? Don't you feel well?"

"Me? I'm like a horse. That's it. A horse." Her face lit up. "That stew reminds me of horses. We used to have a horse on our farm, and I got real attached to it. Ever since that day I've had an aversion toward eating horses."

"It's beef," he said, uncertainly.

"It's horse," she insisted. "We don't have to eat it. We can eat out. Come on. Put your blue suit on. I'm going to shower. Three bucks. I have a dollar left over from last week. We can go places. We can change things around here. Eat every third day, but eat. Make believe you didn't serve those summonses . . . What's the plural of summons, anyhow?" She had taken off her dress and was hanging it carefully in her closet. She sat on the day-bed and removed her shoes and then peeled her stockings off carefully, examining them for the ever-present fear of a run.

He took a slow step toward her. "Are we really going out?"

"Sure," she said, standing and letting her slip fall to the floor. "Four dollars! We haven't spent that much in one evening in a long while. Not since the good old days."

He smiled, remembering. "Boy, we used to go in for things then. One New Year's Eve our part of the check was sixty-five dollars. It seems so far away. Did that really happen to us?"

Martha looked up at him, her eyes alight. "I had a silver evening gown. Way down to there. You said you didn't care how much of me showed. You wanted other men to see and be jealous."

"Your skin was white as milk," he said. "It still is. I love that, Martha, your smooth white skin." He took another step, his eyes on her young body, and then he

stopped. "Boy, you sure deserve more out of life than I've given you."

"Stop that," she said, stepping into the tub and pulling the shower sheet about her. "We ran into tough luck." She started the water going and had to shout above its roar. "Suppose I lost an arm, or a leg."

"What?" he called.

"If I lost a leg," she shouted. "I wouldn't expect you to go back on me. It's just the breaks. We're going through a spell. We'll catch up, some day." She turned the water off. "Nope, no cold. Lukewarm. I know it's bad for the epiglottis but that's the way I am. Are you ready?"

"I'll just wash." He had stripped to his underwear and moved toward the basin. She got out of the tub and he stepped aside to let her pass.

"You used to grab me, in the old days. I must have lost that certain something."

"No, Martha," he said, quickly. He put his arms around her and drew her wet body close to his. He kissed her and let his lips linger on hers. Then he let her go. "Whatever it is, I've lost it. Courage, I guess, or confidence. Even loving you is part of it. You have to feel worthy, I suppose. And I don't."

"Don't be silly. We're us, no matter what's happened. And that's the way we stay." She reached for her towel and started rubbing vigorously. "Come on, I'm getting hungry."

He washed quickly and they both dressed as they talked. "What shirt shall I wear?"

"The white one, with the buttons on the collar. We'll get going. You'll see. We're both strong and healthy, in the prime of life, sound as we ever were, and a good deal smarter. Why shouldn't we get going?"

"I don't know," he said, slowly. "It isn't we. It's me. Baxter Cunningham Third, and somehow I can't catch on. I don't know why. I keep trying. It isn't as if I'd quit." He opened his closet. "Blue tie?"

"Blue tie." But he *had* quit. Only he didn't know it. She knew. He'd given up, and was letting her carry on. Not that he meant to, but he'd tried so many things, from trifling office positions to menial jobs in restaurants, but he couldn't hold any of them, and each time he came out just a bit lower than the time before. He was soft now, all his old assurance gone. And a little man must have assurance, or he becomes little indeed.

"It's the jinx," he said, petulantly. "Old Whiskers chasing me down the street. He won't let up, that old guy won't, once he gets you down."

"Oh, that again. Stop whistling up your jinx. You'll have me doing it soon."

"It must be something," he said, as if his logic were unassailable. "If it isn't a jinx, what is it? Why do things happen to me that don't happen to anybody else? I haven't sinned against God or man. I've led a good clean life. There must be some answer. Last week I went to church and sat there for over an hour. It was sweet and peaceful. I'm going to keep on doing it. It may not do any good but it can't do any harm. They say a return to religion can drive away evil spirits. Do you think it's possible?"

She sighed in resignation. If that would help him it was the thing to do. "You know me," she said. "I expect to roast in Purgatory for a long time. But you can try. Anything that might help. Let Old Whiskers wait outside. Why not?"

"My luck I'd get a ticket for parking him next to a

fire-hydrant." He smiled and looked to Martha for appreciation. She managed a little laugh. "No," he said, with more animation, "I'll drag him inside. I'll beat him with a stack of Bibles. I'll show him it's about time he started hounding some other fellow and laid off B. Cunningham Third."

"Are you ready? Don't forget the money. Here, take this dollar. You're paying the bills. Put the lights out. Did you turn off the gas under the stew? Throw it out anyhow. I don't want you warming it over again tomorrow." She stood before the mirror, straightening her hat and patting her hair into place. "I look all right," she said, suddenly.

He turned to face her, his finger on the switch. "You look wonderful. I don't know how you do it. You get younger every day."

"I looked wonderful when I came in tonight. I'll bet you thought it was Frankenstein. I mean the monster. All right. Got your keys? Clean handkerchief? O.K., big boy, let's get going."

You could get the special dinner at Schrafft's for a dollar thirty-five, oysters, soup, roast duckling with candied sweet potatoes, and a salad, and coffee and dessert, a nice squooshy dessert with hot fudge sauce over it, and then sit there, stuffed, and refuse the tiny peppermints the waitress offered you.

"Smoke?" Martha asked, holding out her cigarettes.

He looked at them longingly, then shook his head. "No use starting again. It'll only get me back in the habit."

"We're breaking rules tonight. Come on. We're making believe we're alive."

"All right. Just one." He took one from her pack and

held a light to hers, gallant, just as in the old days. Then he lit his own and leaned back and puffed contentedly. "This is nice," he said.

"Better than stew?"

"Better than anything. It's not only the food. It's you, and people doing things for you, and the lights and the atmosphere and everything."

"You look nice," she said. "I've always liked you in a white shirt and blue tie."

"It must have been fate. That's what I wore the day I proposed to you. I changed my mind ten different times. I mean about the tie. As if that would have made you say yes or no."

"As a matter of fact it did. I'd decided not to accept you in a red tie."

"You'd decided. As if you knew what was coming."

She smiled, wisely. "That's funny. A girl always knows. Sometimes long before the man makes up his mind."

"Really? I never knew that."

"Most men don't." She kept the long puffs of smoke in her lungs, letting them out in thin streams, as if reluctant to part with such happiness. "I feel fine," she said. "All the weariness seems to have slipped out of my bones. H'mm." She sighed, happily. "Know what we're doing? We're going to the movies."

"Are we?"

"Come on."

They got up. He put down a quarter for a tip, looked at it for a moment, then added another nickel. "She's a nice girl," he said, apologetically. He helped her into her coat and they walked out of the restaurant, heads high, as if they were people of importance. The extra nickel did

that. It was worth it. Outside they looked at the bright lights of Fourteenth Street.

"Let's try Loew's," she suggested. "Maybe we can win something."

"No Screeno tonight. Too bad. I have a feeling we would have won." He stepped up to the window, feeling for his change.

"Loge seats," Martha called. The regular seats were thirty cents, the loges forty. "I'd like to smoke," she explained.

"Two," he said, importantly, "in the loge." The girl snapped off the two tickets as if it were not really a great moment in her life. Loge seats for the Cunninghams!

They found seats well toward the center, soft roomy seats for the extra dime, and she leaned closer to him and lost herself in the story as it unfolded. She bit her lips when the going was sad, the poor millionaire's daughter in danger of losing her handsome boy-friend, but of course it all worked out nicely, as things do in the movies, and she sighed in well-merited relief at the embracing fade-out. Then came the trailers of pictures to come, and she sat back, relaxed, and let the narrow columns of smoke drift upward to be lost in the darkness that surrounded them. The second picture was a comedy, one of those Class B things thrown together on a limited budget, but it was well-paced and real, and she and Baxter looked at each other and laughed in mutual appreciation at the right moments.

It was a long program, three solid hours of entertainment, but she was sorry when it was over. They walked out, still smiling at the parts of the picture that stayed with them. "Like it?" she asked.

He nodded. He was walking a bit straighter, his

shoulders back in a way she hadn't noticed in years. "It does something to you," he said. "Injects new life, like a transfusion. Maybe it's an omen. We've been submitting too long. Maybe we should just hold our heads higher and show we've got a bit of fight left."

"I don't know what it does, but if it lifts us for the time being, it's well worth while." She kept his arm, reluctant to let the evening end. "Walk a bit?"

"I don't mind. It's late, though, for you. How do you feel?"

"Fine. I'm not a bit tired." They walked for a while, letting the cool air blow in their faces. She giggled, snuggling close to him. "You know," she said, "I'm hungry."

"After that meal?"

"I'm always hungrier after a big meal. How about a bite?"

There was an Automat near-by, and they stopped in and had hot chocolate and doughnuts. She looked at her watch and got up slowly, stretching lazily. "Eleven-thirty, and we're still up. The Cunninghams on a bender." Tomorrow she would skimp on her lunch and worry about the budding run in her stocking. But tonight was theirs, and nobody could take it away from them.

Back in their apartment he glanced at her in admiration, as if she were somebody different. "You look lovely," he said. "You look ten years younger."

"Look? I am. Each time happiness moves you a year slips off and lands with a thud in the gutter. Did you know that?"

He took off his blue tie, smoothed it with his hands, and hung it carefully on the rack. "Sure," he said. "Old Jinxo hides behind a tree. Scared."

"How much did we spend?"

"Let's see. Three dollars in the restaurant, and eighty at the movies. That's three eighty, and thirty cents at the Automat. Four ten."

"Four ten," she said. Four ten! She sat down on the bed, shaking her head. They were so broke. Pennies, even pennies, had to be watched and counted. New expenses were always popping up, things unexpected, except that they knew they were coming but didn't want to face them, like dentist's bills and a new dress for her every now and then, and shirts for Baxter when the second repair jobs on his old ones wore through. You could get good shirts for about a dollar, if you waited for a sale, and four shirts, four dollars, would last a long while. Or a dress. There were nice dresses in Klein's for a dollar ninety-eight. A dress and two shirts, or a dress and a shirt and a pair of stockings. You could figure it several different ways. "We can't afford it," she said. "It's wrong."

He stepped closer to her and patted her soft hair. "It was worth it," he said. "You need some happiness."

"I suppose so. Your soul needs sustenance as much as your body. You have to hang ear-rings on your ego, and a cheery smile is worth more than all the blue ties in Macy's. Sayings of Solomon."

"Four bucks," he said. "It's more than we've spent on ourselves in years."

She looked up at him, her eyes alight, her face soft and lovely in the uneven light. "Boy," she said, "didn't we have an evening, though!"

CHAPTER 7

THE door to Obie's apartment was unlocked, so Dale let himself in without bothering to ring. He sank into the grunting couch and shifted until he was comfortable, pulling up one leg so that he could sit on his foot. He could hear the water running in the little bathroom.

Obie came in, drying his hands. "Oh," he said, not surprised at seeing Dale, "so you finally showed up. I thought you might come to the office. I've been looking all over for you."

"So I heard." Dale tried to appear casual, to hide the feeling of excitement that he knew was moving through him. It must be good, whatever it was. Obie wouldn't hunt for him for bad news. They always had that.

"Where in hell do you hang out? I spent thirty-five cents in phone calls."

It was Harkover. He'd read the play. He liked it. It couldn't be anything else. Obie was dragging it out. "Did he," Dale started, trying to suppress the hope in his voice, "Harkover, did he read the play?"

"Harkover?" Obie shook his head. "No, not that stinker. You know him. He only reads in the bath-tub. You'll never hear from him in the middle of the week."

Then it wasn't that. Nothing else could matter very much. "Hell. If he can stand it we can." He reached for a magazine and turned the pages. "What's up?"

"Well," Obie said, hesitantly, "I got an assignment for you. Two, in fact. One for cash and one for glory."

"Real money?"

"Ten bucks."

"Wonderful. Ten fat dollars. What is it? Poem, trade paper, Chamber of Commerce?"

Obie grinned. "This is new. A confirmation speech. What is it these Jewish kids have when they're thirteen?"

"A mistress?"

"Sure. Besides that. You know, the ceremonial approach to manhood. Speeches, uncles, and noodle soup. Today I leave the bonds of childhood and so forth, ten bucks worth of slush for a Mrs. Goldberg of White Plains."

Dale nodded. "I know." What a let-down. But that was the way things were. "I'll give 'em a speech that'll have White Plains by the ears. What's the other thing?"

"Oh, that." Obie shifted in his chair. "Look, Dale. This is right up your alley. You need experience. Some of your stuff is fine, but after all you've never seen it, acted out for you. This will give you the opportunity. Otherwise I wouldn't have promised."

"This is going to be good."

"Wait, now. You can't tell what it might lead to. This woman is a real big shot, head of the Ladies' Auxiliary of Bedford. She has all sorts of connections."

"Snap out of it," Dale said, impatiently. "You don't need the build-up. What is it?"

"Well, it's a one-act play. They're putting on a benefit performance in a couple of weeks, and they thought a play would be just the thing."

"Wouldn't it, though? You know I haven't any one-act plays."

"I know. I figured, well, that is, the ladies thought

maybe you'd dash one off. Some simple thing, not too tough. I know you can do it, Dale, and I promised this old dame. It's for a worthy cause. A new couch or a set of false teeth. Something worth while. She'd like to have it not later than next Friday."

"Easy," said Dale, sarcastically. "That gives me virtually a week. I can polish up Mrs. Goldberg's speech in the meantime."

"It's not so much. Thirty-five pages or so. That stuff goes fast."

"Sure. I type eight pages an hour. Four hours. Maybe an extra hour for revisions. You don't want it tonight, do you?"

"Take your time," Obie said, soothingly. "Friday will be all right."

Dale scowled at the magazine. "What happened to *A Night at an Inn*? They've *always* used that."

"This bunch wants something original. Something modern. Problems."

"You mean they admit there are problems? In Bedford?"

"They catch on. Some of them read the newspapers."

"Let's see, now. The boy can love his sweetheart's mother but finds out that her second husband is really his father. They all join the Foreign Legion. Can you get a camel?"

"No junk. They want real stuff. World problems. Unemployment, War, strikes, blood. You know."

"Oh." Dale stretched luxuriously. "Why didn't you tell me? I can chop a scene out of any of my plays."

"Listen, you dumb lug, I want something new. Something fresh. You can't tell what it might lead to. Look at this Goldberg thing. I got her through a recommenda-

tion of one of the readers down at the Doran office. She remembered your work. Ten bucks. That's how things start. We'll get publicity out of this Auxiliary thing, maybe some real assignments."

"Big money. All of twenty bucks at the same time. Writing is a cinch. Pour your heart into one of the finest plays written in America, then sit back and wait for Horse Harkover to take a bath. Fine. Meanwhile you can write one-act plays for glory or fine juicy speeches for Mrs. Goldberg's boy Marvin at ten dollars. Write, children, write. Starve in garrets, but write. Turn your body inside out, sweat, starve, slave, but get it down on paper. See the glamour, the glory, the rewards! See the lovely hours. All of them, tossing and turning in your sleep to shape a speech, to round out a scene. Even a ditch-digger has his hours for recreation, a day he can call his own. Write a one-act play. They wouldn't go up to a colored maid and ask her to do a heavy day's washing for nothing. For glory, or for contacts. God, why did I ever take up writing? Do you know anybody that needs a good window-cleaner?"

"You picked it. I never told you to write. Look at me. You only write the stuff. I have to sell it."

"With amazing success."

"You can't force stuff down producers' throats. They see your plays. They manage to remain remarkably calm. I can't help it if you're the greatest playwright in America. If you were lousy, I might stand a chance. They don't want quality."

"God, I don't know what they want." Dale leaned back against the wall. "I have some talent and I'm willing to work. Why can't I get something they want?"

"You've got it, kid. I know. Maybe you'll die with it,

as the suitor said to the old maid. But there's something there. Something."

"O.K.," Dale said, complacently. "As long as you say so, son. I'll stay with it. Food isn't everything."

"Writing's a part of you. It's in you, and it has to come out. Nothing will stop you, as long as you're hungry. After you're rich your stuff will stink."

"I'll take a chance."

"You and me both."

"That little girl in Harkover's office said I was the greatest playwright in America."

"What little girl?"

"That typist. I took her out to lunch once."

"What some girls will do for a meal."

"She meant it. The greatest playwright in North America, she said."

"It was America a second ago."

"Well, North America. I never heard of any playwrights in South America anyhow."

"You don't have to sell me. I've told it to the producers so often I'll soon believe it myself. Edwin, Edwin, the fellow who wrote that remarkable one-act play."

"What one-act play?"

"The one I was telling you about." Obie reached for a cigarette, lit it, and puffed contentedly. "Look. I know this racket. It's a chance. Things can happen. You get a bit of publicity and this girl can go to Harkover, can show him newspaper clippings, and then tell him he's got your play right there in his office."

"Could she get him to take a bath?"

"You'll do it, won't you? I can't let them down."

Dale looked at the ceiling. "I could have Mrs. Goldberg give the entrance cue by belching——"

"Wait. Stop clowning. I have to get this settled."

"I might as well get going on the speech. Ten bucks is ten bucks. Sure. Curtain. Lights. Cue as indicated by Mama. Enter Marvin, galloping on hobby horse. Gallop, gallop. The transition from boyhood to manhood. Throws away horse, stands erect, arms outstretched, and says, Today——"

"Lay off," Obie said, impatiently. "If we're going to do this play we ought to get a sort of outline together, you know, then all you have to do is fill in. Dialogue always was a cinch for you."

"Will they have programs?"

"Printed programs. With your name on the cover. Well, maybe mimeographed. They promised me swell publicity, too."

"Sure. I know. The Ladies' Auxiliary presented a one-act play last night at Public School Seventeen. Josephine McSlush played the leading role, supported by a pair of crutches. The proceeds were seven dollars and sixteen cents, which will go toward having Miss McSlush's seat upholstered. Next week, East Lynne."

"You can't tell. It's worth trying. Maybe there'll be an accident, a fire, six people killed, we'll get your name in somehow. Always get your name before the public. Who said that? Somebody must have, otherwise I made it up. Anyhow, he was right. Let them see it, one way or another. One person, two, three, people who know that you exist. Build an audience. In forty years it may come to twelve people and a dog, but at least they know Dale Edwin."

"Such lovely prospects. Forty years. Sixty years. What the hell. I can wait. Meanwhile, a play. One act. Loaded with problems. No long speeches. Not too many cues. I know these ladies' things. Have they anybody good?"

Real good? Somebody who can handle a speech, so I can build the others around her?"

Obie took his cigarettes out of his pocket and fingered them nervously. "Listen, Dale, a ringer or two won't hurt. I was sort of figuring on Betty Lou for the lead. You remember that little Southern girl?"

"Oh, God."

"She's a swell kid," Obie said.

"Sure. For certain purposes. But can she act?"

"She's all right. She can carry a scene for you. I've seen her work, and I swear I was enthralled."

"I know. But in the play she'll have to keep her clothes on."

Obie shook his head. "You're all wrong. She's a sweet kid. And she can act. I'm telling you."

Dale shook his head sadly. "What difference does it make? It might as well be the you-all as anybody else. Can you get a male lead? Preferably one you're not in love with."

"Don't be so God-damned funny. I'll get somebody. There're dozens of young kids who'd be glad to do it. Outside of that we'll let the Auxiliary carry on. They're not so bad. I hope. Oh, before I forget. Work in a role for an old lady with a French accent and a limp."

"A what?"

"She's secretary. We have to get her in. And the scenery. You'd better jot down notes. We have two drops, one of the Ninth Avenue El, and one of a harbor with ships in the distance. You can have your choice."

"Nice leeway. I can use one or the other."

"Not both. And see if you can manage a small part for a tall gent with a bald head and long drooping mustaches. He's husband of the treasurer."

"No Chinamen?"

"No Chinamen."

"You wouldn't want your grandmother trotting across the stage shouting, Hurray for the Dodgers?"

"Not unless you need it."

"I mean, I'm willing to oblige. And you want a problem?"

"Yes. Sure. Don't forget the problem."

"Well, let's get that settled first, then we can go to work on the old lady with the limp."

"And French accent."

"She can be a spy. Problem. Problem." Dale scratched his chin. "What'll it be, defeatist?"

"Of course. It's a one-act play, isn't it?"

"Do they want that?"

"That's all anybody wants these days. As long as they get a ray of hope at the end. You know. Gloom, gloom, gloom, open the doors, let the sunshine in."

"Betty Lou standing over the dead bodies and saying, It's not the end, it's the beginning."

"What else?"

"Swell. I was wondering if we could end that way."

"Why not? No use changing your standard endings."

"Louse. Even you like my curtain lines."

"Well," Obie said, still uncertain, "it's settled, then, isn't it? I'll tell Betty Lou. She'll love it. And let me know about the juvenile, tall, short, dark, I can get any kind. Give them most of the lines. The ladies aren't so hot on memory. Betty Lou will go better on the weeps, not too good on comedy. Try to get as many of these dames in as possible, you know, standing around, no lines, maybe a bit of cheering or booing. They all want their names in the programs."

"It's tough. They get in the way." He ran his hands

through his hair, thinking. "Maybe we can give them audience parts. Let them sit in their seats and shout things. Peace! Solidarity! Ham on rye! Down with something! Work them in as part of the play. They can have their notes right in front of them. You know, that's not a bad idea."

Obie looked up in undisguised admiration. "Bad? It's positive genius. Do it. That's swell."

"Praise from an agent! A new day is dawning. Open the doors, let the sunshine in."

"You won't let me down, will you, Dale? I'm serious. I gave them my word."

Dale nodded. "O.K. You'll get your play. And what a play."

"You'll start right away?"

"Let's see. We have our plot. Frustration, frustration, frustration, hope. Despair. Tiny ray of light. All in the shadow of the Ninth Avenue El."

"Don't forget the lady with the limp."

"It's in the bag. I'll get started tomorrow."

"Tonight," Obie said. "Stew over it in the subway. By Fourteenth Street you ought to have it pretty well worked out."

"I'll have to ride up in the local."

"Don't fall down on it, now. I promised. Anyhow, I have a hunch. It's going to lead to things. Big things. You remember what Betty Lou said?"

"What did she say?"

"About your palm. Sky-rocket success, and all."

Dale sniffed. "You know I don't believe in that stuff."

"Neither do I, but it might as well be favorable, in case we're wrong." He looked at Dale quizzically. "We're all set now, aren't we?"

Dale got slowly to his feet and walked up and down before the couch, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "Scene," he said, painting an imaginary picture with his hands, "the Ninth Avenue El. Leaning against the pillar is discovered an old lady with a French accent. She is selling chameleons. In the corner we see Betty Lou wrestling with her Southern accent. Enter Marvin in his blue serge suit. Grasps Mama Goldberg firmly by the hand. Gives Goldberg père the old Nazi salute. Throws aside his hobby horse with a gesture of independence, walks to right center and lifts hand for silence. Speech! Speech! (From the audience.) As Marvin begins a hush falls on the characters who have forgotten their lines. The words flow from his lips like honey over flapjacks. Today, he shouts, I step from the abyss of infancy to the threshold of adultery. World problems now are mine, cannons booming in the distance and half-wits fretting about one-act plays. It is part of me, all of me. I have grown. I am aware. Open the doors. Today I am a man . . ."

CHAPTER 8

THE days moved slowly for Hank, but finally Tuesday rolled around, as it always did. Something exciting, Connie had said. A movie! Well, it wasn't the apex in thrills, but they would be together, and that was all he wanted at the moment.

"Lucky you picked Tuesday," he said, when he saw her. "They have Screeno at the Sheridan."

"That isn't luck." Connie let her fingers rest lightly on his arm. "That's foresight." She studied the sign in front of the theatre. "Jack-pot six hundred dollars. Does anybody ever win that?"

"Not people like us. Some millionaire's daughter, slumming at a downtown movie."

He bought the tickets and they went inside. She kept her arm in his as they walked up the heavily carpeted stairs. There was something intimate about that, like the married couples going to their weekly shows.

An usher stepped over to them, stiff but friendly. "Loge?"

Hank showed him the stubs. "What picture is on now, son?"

"Daredevil Doyle of the Mounted." He glanced at his watch. "Be off in fifteen minutes."

"Let's sit here," Connie suggested. The lounge was nicely furnished, soft lamps perched in friendly fashion

over the large inviting couches. "I hate to see the end of a picture first."

"Screeno next," the boy said. "Jack-pot of six hundred dollars."

"How does Doyle make out?" Hank asked. "Do they get him?"

The boy grinned. "No, sir. He wins in the end. He's a square-shooter." He went back to his post at the door and they sat in one of the big soft chairs. Connie let her coat slip back from her shoulders. They turned to each other, embarrassed, waiting.

Finally she said, "It was nice today, wasn't it? I mean, for so early in the year."

"It's funny," Hank said. "Things surge through you till you're overcome with all you're going to say, and then you wind up talking about the weather."

"We don't have to stick to it. Not like your Mister What's-his-name with his daily weather reports. We can switch."

They could hear the bark of guns from inside the theatre. "Doyle wins in the end," Hank said, "because he's a square-shooter. There's your escape for you. In real life they'd have his pants. Maybe that's the trouble with your pal, Dale, writing about life as it is. Nobody wants that."

"What's the matter?" she asked. "Bitter today?"

He shook his head. "Tired, I suppose. I don't know. I get discouraged. I wanted to talk to you, and still I was scared stiff. I was afraid we wouldn't know what to say. I always get that fear."

"It's easier here. Doyle of the Mounted can dash in and save us."

"Every now and then they give you a movie about

things as they are, and the public stays away from it in droves. They hate to see themselves crawling. They don't want to read about it. That's why they remain in the dumps. They're satisfied. Some day they hope to win the six hundred dollar jack-pot, and that's enough to keep them going. Get 'em, Doyle, bring the big bad villain back to justice, which always triumphs in the end. Ask the usher, if you don't believe me."

"I believe you. I've been to enough movies to know. Be a right guy and you'll wind up on top."

He turned toward her. "How do they do it, Connie? Actually, in real tough life. I want to get somewhere, do something, and I don't know how. Hard work, give it all you have, stick to it, boys, and you're bound to win. Sure. It's all the bunk. I used to read that stuff. Dale Carnegie and Rosicrucian and You-Too-Can-Be-An-Executive. I was one of the You-Too boys. Our first big shock was the day that *Success Magazine* went into bankruptcy."

"It did, didn't it?"

He nodded. "Sure did. They didn't have the answer." He shook his head. "There must be something, some magic formula. What is it? Some of them get ahead. How? They can't all marry boss's daughters. Or can they? Some fathers don't even own a bank. What do you do then? Marry the fair wench and send her out scrubbing floors? Some parents swing a pick and shovel all their lives, and all you inherit is a strong back and a good pair of arms. Maybe a fine digestive system. Not that that's bad. But you need fuel to keep the old intestines churning. Soup and steaks and apple-pie. So you toil, as your dad did, and you too leave your children a heritage of good health and a pair of old shoes."

"I've lived through plenty of discomforts," she said. "I've had nice easy times, too. Somehow I remember the tough times. They stay with you, things you can mull over in your memory."

"It's nice to rough it when you know you can return to comfort. Like these millionaires in their hunting lodges. It's different with miners. They don't wash up and rest in a chaise-longue."

"If I had my choice, all of one or all of the other, I think I'd take the rough life. It keeps you alive. You atrophy the other way."

"Sure. But it's a nice sort of disintegration. You can have more fun getting the gout than pellagra. Do you see what I mean?"

"I know," she said. "I'm not disagreeing. I'm trying to cheer you, that's all. Things really aren't so black. Not while we're eating, and sleeping, and doing most of the things we want to do. We don't need millions, do we?"

"No. Not millions. We're glad we're alive."

She stared at the circle of shaded lights on the ceiling. "You remember Baxter? My brother-in-law? The thin fellow with the glasses?"

"Sure. I chatted with him at that literary party. Nice fellow."

"Nice." She pressed her lips in an unhappy line. "He's through, in the prime of life. Things happened to him that he couldn't take. Some of us succumb to germs, don't we? Some fight them off just like that. He's one of these mild little fellows that never got going again. All he needed was a job."

"There ought to be at least that," he said. "People aren't asking for much. Jobs. The right to live. Why can't they have it?"

"Well, why?"

"I don't know. I sit back and say it's wrong. I don't know the solution. I don't want things like that to happen to anybody. To me. I don't want to reach the age of fifty, or sixty, and discover that I'm a burden. They tell you to save, to prepare, and so on. Put aside forty bucks a week out of a total income of forty-five, that's two thousand a year, and in ten years you have twenty thousand dollars. It's as easy as that. Invest it in good sound bonds, and in a year you'll be nicely broke. What of it? You can start all over. Forty a week, for ten more years, and another batch of sure-fire bonds, and by this time the banker who sold them to you can live happily ever after. You? Oh, you can go back to work again. You're used to it by now. Easy living would only ruin your digestion. That sort of thing is for bankers."

"You *are* bitter," she said. "I didn't expect that."

"Am I? My father was pretty provident, for a miner. When he died he left insurance of almost eight thousand dollars. That was a fortune to us. My mother went to a nice gold-and-marble bank in Pittsburgh and told them her story. She had to live on her income, something sound, nothing risky, she wasn't going to be like the other widows who blew their legacies in four years. She was doing the sensible thing. No small-time crook was going to trim her. They loaded her up with South American bonds that went to nothing in six years. By that time I was at college and I started looking into things. The bank got fifteen percent for floating those bonds. Why not? Nobody ever expected to redeem them. No small-time crooks. We got the real thing. Those were the days when we trusted banks."

"Your mother alive?"

He nodded, slowly. "I send her ten dollars every week, and I feel like a heel. She won't come on east. She lives with a sister out in Rhodora. Near Pittsburgh. She won't even use the whole ten. Sometimes she buys me things, mufflers and socks. You know. She's nice."

"I'll bet."

"Soft, and kind. She's not bitter. I suppose that's the trouble with us. Not enough resentment in our hearts. Mother doesn't hate bankers. Neither do I. She takes it all as an act of God. It might have happened to any investment. Just as crops fail. Only I happen to know it wasn't so. But I accept it too. I didn't go down to the bank with a gun in my hand. I didn't even bother calling them up. What good would it have done? I'm sure that everything was perfectly legal. The distinctions are pretty fine. A man would go to jail for stealing a loaf of bread. These bankers had millions and wanted a few thousand more. Nothing wrong about that. Or is there?"

"You can't put your finger on it," Connie said, thoughtfully. "You're right. Bitterness won't help. There's too much of that already. There ought to be a solution. Some sort of solution. I mean for the common people, you and me and your mother and Baxter. It's like Mark Twain's weather, everybody complaining and nobody doing anything about it."

"What can we do? We stand up when they play the national anthem. We take our hats off when the flag goes by. We believe in certain staunch sound things, just as people in other countries did, and then leaders change, overnight, and you're bound by a new set of rules. Who knows what to believe, or why? The young kids think they have all the answers. How can they tell me I'm wrong, that they know all that there is to be known? I'm

still trying to get a foot-hold, something to rest firmly against and know that it's there, today and tomorrow too. Frankly, I haven't found it yet. Who knows what to believe, or why? The hero of today is the villain of tomorrow. Values change, and unless we change with them we find we're stuck. And sometimes you can't switch quickly enough. You've been too thoroughly sold on one brand of panacea to junk it and start on another. So we grope, and we go on groping." He opened his jacket to release the accumulated warmth. Then he laughed, uncomfortably. "I'm talking too much," he said, suddenly.

She put her hand on his arm. "Go ahead," she said. "I love it. I'm with you, so much. Some people are so sure of themselves. Like Dale. In everything. He knows he's right, and that makes everybody who disagrees with him an utter damned fool. Of course he reserves the right to change, and boy, must you change with him! But while he thinks one way, there's only that way. It's nice to find somebody who's uncertain too."

"I'm never sure. Most of the time I let the other fellow do the leading and I keep ducking. It doesn't matter, you always seem to wind up on your back-side watching the stars. You go in one direction and the world moves in the other, and it always bumps you the second time around. Stand still and things go off and leave you in the middle of a dream. Put that in one of your poems."

"I did," she said. "Years ago. All poets start with dreams."

"I often wonder what I can do about it. Talk? Where does it get you? Sure there are problems, things to be solved, people to be helped, and all we do is sit around and say, Tsk tsk. I ought to be out with Dare-Devil Doyle, sav-

ing maidens in distress. I'm bigger than he is, stronger, and I'm a square-shooter too. You never saw the old Dare-Devil selling ping-pong balls, did you?"

"We can't all crusade," she said. "We don't even know for what. It's easy for Doyle. They kidnap the blonde in reel one and he has to rescue her before the Screeno starts. Our problems are too vague. We don't know where to start."

"Some day. Some day. I don't know. I'm not growing any younger. I haven't gone a step further than my Dad. That's something to be proud of." He nodded thoughtfully. "Hell's bells," he said, suddenly. "Next time I bring my soapbox. Vote for Brady, folks, God knows why, but vote for him."

"I'll vote for him," she said, smiling.

He smiled back at her, and reached for her hand. He could talk to her. They had something for each other. He knew it. She knew it, too. Here were his thoughts, the things that had whirled through his mind, time and again, when he was alone, and now he could tell them to her. Only to her. Not to any other person in all the world. Never in groups, with discussions swirling around them, and he standing there silently, wondering, leaving unsaid the things that teemed inside of him. Now he could talk.

The usher stepped toward them and stopped, apologetically. They looked up. "Picture's over, sir," he said. "Screeno going on in a minute."

Connie turned to Hank. "It's nice here. We're so alone."

"Many people in there?" Hank asked.

"Almost full," the boy said. "I can find some seats."

"We're going to sit it out," Hank said. "What do we want with six hundred bucks?"

Connie nodded, agreeing. "It would only make us soft. Give us the gout. How do you win the jack-pot, anyhow?"

"Don't you know?" Hank said, wisely. "You have to be the manager's nephew."

"I'm not," she said. "Are you?"

"Not that I know of. We'll stay here and solve problems and things."

"If you get Screeno on the first seven spins," the usher explained, "you win the jack-pot. It goes up every week. Last month a young kid won four hundred." He went back toward his exit and watched for a few minutes, then came over to them again. "Sixty-six," he said, "forty-one, twelve, and two, so far."

They pulled out their cards and looked at them. "I have a twelve," Connie said. Hank didn't have any of them. Connie shrugged. "That's the way it is. I never win anything."

"Sorry," the boy said, as he left them again. "You still have a chance at the regular Screeno. Twenty-dollar top prize."

They looked at each other and laughed. "Friend of yours?" Hank said. "I bet you signal for him."

"Sure I do," she said, "it breaks the monotony."

"I never talked so much. Not in all my life."

"That's the trouble with these strong silent guys. You think a four-word speech is a filibuster. I'm afraid I like it."

"I've never been close to anybody," he said. "Even at college. I never could talk to men, anyhow. At first they thought I was swell-headed. It wasn't that. I was uncomfortable. I never knew what to say. I couldn't wait until I got away from people. I guess I'm still that way. I try, though. Try to say the proper things. Nice day we're

having. Lovely day." He kept looking at her, wondering at the strange pounding around his heart. "Connie," he said, suddenly, "you're lovely. I never said that to anybody before, either. Maybe I'll never say it again."

There was a long pause. She could feel his eyes on her, and didn't want to turn to meet them. After a while she said, "You're doing all right, for a quiet fellow. Keep going."

He shook his head. "I can't. Not prepared. Tonight, in bed, I'll wonder what I said and where in hell I got the courage. One thing I won't take back, though. You're lovely."

The warm color kept rushing to her cheeks. She took her hat off and put it on the bench beside her. These movie houses were always overheated. But she had that funny feeling in her feet, as if they didn't belong to her. "Tell me," she said. "You don't have to stop."

"I'm not used to it. I'd rather listen. That's what I've always done. I'm beginning to see why people who don't amount to much talk all the time. Ladies in beauty parlors, or little big-shots to elevator operators. My Mr. Partridge. It gives them a feeling of power. They pick on people who can't get away. Like you. You have to sit here and take it. I've overworked it, though." He motioned to the boy.

"Yes, sir," the boy said. "Screeno just finished. The second feature is starting. Wife Versus Nurse."

"Who wins? Dare-Devil Doyle?"

"The wife. She's a square-shooter."

"How did the Screeno come out?"

"Nobody took the jack-pot. A Mister Martinson of West Twelfth Street won the twenty-dollar prize."

"Good," Hank said. "I'll send my mother's bankers after him."

"Well," Connie said. "This is our night at the movies. Shall we see the virtuous wife come through?" There were more people in the lounge, now that the Screeno was over.

Hank looked around. "Let's get out. I've had enough of movies for one night. A double-feature wears me out." He slipped a crumpled bill to the boy, who smiled his thanks. "So long, son. Let me know when one of those square-shooters gets licked. I'll stay through the picture twice."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Hank helped her with her coat, and she held his arm firmly as they went down the steps. "We're going to spend our lives," she said, "not riding in taxis, and not seeing movies. All sorts of things like that."

"You heard the one and only lecture course given by Professor Brady. That ought to make a night of it."

They pushed their way out of a side exit, and she stood there for a moment, looking up at the stars. "I don't care what you say," she said. "It is a lovely night."

"It is," he said. "It really is." He could feel her arm pressing against him, through his coat. He shrugged, a warm pleasant feeling coming over him. "It's not even such a terrible world."

CHAPTER 9

Good morning. Good morning. Do you need any good lawyers today? No? Sorry. We'll try the lady next door. Good morning. Good morning. And do you need any good lawyers today? Or bad lawyers, or maybe somebody to scrub the floor? Forty cents an hour, same as the colored help. We don't charge an extra cent for our L.L.D. Or for our family, pre-revolutionary. Yes, we go back to seventeen-forty, there was a Captain Cunningham with General Gates at Saratoga and a Colonel Cunningham somewhere else in Washington's army. But we're a newer edition of the Cunninghams, slightly in the dumps, so we stick to current prices, forty cents an hour. No? Sorry.

But of course he couldn't do that. It had taken all the courage he possessed to go through the entire building that time, fourteen forty Broadway, the lawyers' hangout, top to bottom, not missing an office, asking if there wasn't something, anything, he could do. Some of them were kind and gentle, recognizing his plight, and some tried to be funny, wait a second, bud, we'll make the rounds with you, but he'd stuck to his guns, top to bottom, and when he'd finished he was worn and depressed and felt like crying, and not a single offer. Not one. He had to go home and tell that to Martha, and he had a weak feeling around his groin, as if he'd been kicked each time somebody turned him down. Who wanted lawyers in 1931? Who wanted them today?

He shouldn't have been a desk lawyer. If he had worked up a clientele he would have something now. No matter how little, it would be something. He could have joined the Democratic Club, the way the young fellows did nowadays, campaign a bit, speak and make the rounds of houses, soliciting votes, getting bits of patronage here and there in return. But he'd never gone in for that, and it was too late now. You can't start from scratch at forty-four and expect to get anywhere. Besides, he didn't have it any more. That something that makes you click. He was a bit slower on the upgrade, his mind not functioning as clearly as it used to, his hands fumbling and uncertain. And he looked like hell. Even when he put on his new suit and took a close shave. In the old days that was all he needed, blue, he liked blue, his neat blue suit and a four-dollar tie, a hair-cut every Friday and a manicure twice a month. Spats. It made him feel real doggy. Not these days. Nothing seemed to help. He felt seedy, and knew that he looked it. He couldn't appear before a jury now.

After he left Harvard he got a job without too much trouble. A good record, a letter from his professor, and a fine family background, all that made the way an easy one. If it hadn't been for that he might have hung out his shingle and tried for a practice of his own. But he caught on with a fine firm, seven or eight names on the letter-head, and one day his name would be among them. Baxter Cunningham, Third. It sounded swell. He did a good job there, and they liked him, but then the crash hit them terribly hard, and suddenly business fell off to almost nothing, nothing at all, and they couldn't afford to go on paying salaries. Some of the fellows hung around, at no pay, because there was nothing else they could do.

That was when Papa Hoover was telling everybody that prosperity was just around the corner, and certainly it had to be so, under a Republican administration. But they couldn't wait, they couldn't stand the terrifying idleness of the office, it was too much like sitting in your grave and waiting for death to overtake you, so one by one they drifted off and never came back. Never.

He thought he could get something else. Perhaps not quite as good, but that was all right, for the time being. Ten percent less, even twenty. They could live. They had a little money in the bank, perhaps six or seven hundred dollars, and he could borrow a few hundred more on his insurance, in a pinch. He went around to his so-called connections, firms he'd done work for, prepared contracts and things, and no one seemed to need him. He remembered how he'd saved his best opportunity for last. The Mullin Company. They'd been particularly pleased with his work on that big consolidation back in twenty-eight. He'd gotten real friendly with old man Mullin. Had a few scotch-and-sodas with him down at the Princeton Club. Sure. But that was in 1928. And this was 1931. Old man Mullin sat as though all the calcium had gone out of his bones. Sure I remember you, Cunningham. Good job you did. Yah. We were going to save on taxes. God. We may come out of this with our skins and we may never come out at all. I have commitments, man, two kids at college and I don't know if I can pay their way. I used to be a rich man. Now I'm scared. Fifty-eight, and scared. How long can it go on? Maybe we spread out a bit too fast. I don't know. I was fooled like the rest of them. The new prosperity. God.

That was Mullin. His best bet. Where do we go from here? You should have been a trial lawyer, his friends

told him. There are always cases in court. Fine advice, and see if you can palm it off on your grocer for an extra week's credit. A trial lawyer. Sure. Look at Steuer, or Leibowitz, or Clarence Darrow. They didn't have to beg for a pack of cigarettes, or did they? Maybe he could have been. He'd had his day in court——

Her name was Rose Calligari, and she was the daughter of the janitor of the apartment house where they lived. She was a warm, pretty thing, and one day when the boy who'd been visiting her pretty regularly decided to give her the air she picked up a kitchen knife and let him have it. He was in pretty bad shape, and for a while they thought he'd die, but he recovered, so the charge against her was only assault. Her parents felt that there was no lawyer in the world but Baxter Cunningham, and he agreed to defend her. He had to get leave of absence from the office, but that wasn't hard, in those days.

He wasn't much of a speaker, but this time his heart was in it, for he felt that the girl was not without justification, so he spoke in a quiet, confident way, and he had her wear a simple black dress with a childish white collar, her hair in bangs and no make-up, a trick he'd learned long ago, and he didn't rant and rave the way the prosecuting attorney did. Quiet, counsellor, the judge said once, we can hear you. To the D.A. Not to him. He was going swell.

I object! The power it gave him! The eager eyes upon him. Not that it mattered, but it showed them that he knew his law. Objection sustained, the judge said. Re-frame the question. Ah, that was good. The jury saw that he knew his stuff. They were with him. They wanted him to win. Sure she had stabbed him. In the heat of the moment. How long can these vultures claw at the decency

of womanhood? What would your daughter do? She is a human being, gentlemen, a woman. This is no crime for gain. This is a woman protecting her dearest right, her honor. Soft, persuasive. He couldn't thunder down their throats, but they all leaned forward to hear him. To hear *him*. They settled back when the other fellow spoke. He had them, he knew. And he stood there, quietly, his heart thumping and his knees shaking, as they filed back into the jury box. He'd won. He knew. He could tell from their faces, and the D.A. knew it too, and the foreman said, *Not guilty*, too loud, as if he were embarrassed, and the judge waved the girl out of the courtroom, and she wanted to kiss him but he backed away and merely shook hands.

Triumph, triumph, something that stayed with him in the years to come. He could sway juries, not by bombast or by bluff, but by quiet persuasion. He could make himself part of them, the thirteenth man on the jury, talk their language and think their thoughts. He could do it. It should have been his career. He'd saved Rose where another lawyer would have lost her. A throbbing, vibrant, living girl, rotting away in a damp dark prison cell. But he kept her from that, and God knew where she was now. But he could do it, for Rose and for other people, because he had something, some little twist or turn of phrase or motion that could make people believe him, twelve people at a time.

"Gentlemen of the jury," he said, aloud, facing the imaginary box, "send this little girl back to her mother. She has done no wrong, committed no crime. Can you find it in your hearts to thrust her among the shop-lifters, the petty crooks, the prostitutes, to learn their ways, to become one of them? Can you face your wives, your sweet-

hearts, your daughters, tonight and tell them that you sent a sweet and innocent girl away?" He walked up and down before the jurymen, pausing before the soft one with the graying hair. Smithers, age fifty-one, mechanic, married. He remembered. Smithers was with him. He was a righteous old duck, the sort that would kill to defend his daughter's honor. He worked on Smithers a bit, then switched suddenly to Dalton, a dapper bachelor, the sort that might get a girl into trouble. Conscience, for Dalton, make him squirm for every girl that he'd wronged. That was the way. Each one is an instrument, and he played the tune that fit the moment best.

He rolled up his sleeves, striding up and down majestically, reliving his moment, and then his foot hit the slop-pail and over it went, the dirty water splattering on the freshly washed linoleum. He stood there for a moment, wondering whether this trifle should interrupt his summation. After all, a girl's liberty is at stake. He paused briefly, letting the foreman bring in a hasty verdict, Not guilty, not guilty, then hurried into the bedroom to change to his oldest trousers before mopping up. He went back to the kitchen. The jury was gone now, only the water on the floor remaining. He got down on his knees and spread his cloth on the mess, wringing it into his pail with trembling fingers. I saved her, he thought. I could save others. Things get in the way. Floor and pails and things. Otherwise I'd be doing things. Big things. There's a place in the world for Baxter Cunningham, Third, a niche he can fill. People need him. Poor, oppressed, down-trodden, they need a keen, alert lawyer, one who can take a jury apart and see what makes it go. If he didn't get the water up in a hurry it would seep through and then Mrs. Carter, or Carver, downstairs

would start banging on the ceiling with her broom-handle. His fingers didn't move as quickly as they used to, but God, he was trying. He didn't want that Mrs. Carver up there again. She had a shrill, penetrating voice, and he felt like running for cover when she showed up, not finding the words with which to appease her.

Well. It was all up now, most of it, anyhow, but it was too late, they'd all gone home, Rose and her mother and Smithers and the rest of the jury, and the judge too, the judge who'd purred, Objection sustained. Good old judge. He'd won him right at the start, but now he was gone, because after all that was twelve years ago and you couldn't expect them all to hang around forever. He cleaned his hands on his trousers and reached for the towel to dry the sweat on his forehead, and wondered why the tears kept coming to his eyes in this, his hour of triumph, his hour of glory.

CHAPTER 10

OF COURSE, there was one way you could make sure that Dale was on time, and that was to pick him up at his room. Yes, at his room, and Emily Post be damned, because first of all you were engaged and secondly you were the sort of couple that didn't seem to have moments. And without moments you were distinctly outside of the danger zone.

Connie could hear the clatter of his typewriter as she stood at the door. Strange how inspiration seemed to strike him fifteen minutes before the time of their date. He must have spent hours, days, in idleness, but now he was racing along as if all eternity and the fate of the worlds depended on the words he was pouring from his eager machine. She waited for a pause in the racket, then pressed the bell. He came to the door in his shirt-sleeves.

"Hello, Princess," he said, surprised. "Come on in. You arrived at the psychological moment. I've just finished a one-act play. Obie needs it for some Ladies' Auxiliary." He waved the sheets at her triumphantly.

"Good for you. How is it?"

"Terrible. What the hell. If the Auxiliary can stand it, I can. Obie's newest passion flower will play the lead. You know, that Betty Lou. Good God, what men will do for a pink and white body. She took a course at a

dramatic school in Montgomery, Alabama. It won't help. She'll have to get by on her natural resources." He slammed the manuscript down on the table and stretched. "I'm supposed to be a playwright, and I can turn out stuff like this. Good Lord."

"It's probably the best thing you ever did. What's it called?"

"Oh," he said, "we have to christen it. Night Over Cess-pool. No? Give me an idea. What did you once tell me you called your first poem?"

"Nocturne," she said. "I wouldn't use that. It's too trite. How about Prelude?"

"Prelude. Prelude. That has possibilities. Prelude to what? It has to be Prelude to Love, or Prelude to Indigestion. Something like that." *

"Prelude to Life," she said, thoughtfully. "Prelude to Living. How does that sound?"

"These people aren't living. You're assuming too much."

"There's hope, isn't there? Somewhere, some time before the curtain falls?"

"Not in an Edwin play. Things get blacker and blacker. You scan the horizon for a ray of hope, and you see nothing. Nothing."

She leaned forward excitedly. "There it is. Fuss and turmoil and then nothing. It's perfect. Prelude to Nothing."

He looked at her in admiration. "Say, that's good. Prelude to Nothing." He put his arms around her in a spontaneous hug, then let her go and scribbled the words across the top of the page. "Prelude to Nothing. Swell. Boy, is this our lucky day! Look." He reached into his pocket and pulled out some bills. "Twelve bucks. Obie

sold a Western for me. Twenty dollars. Waffles Rides Again. Good old Waffles. Not to mention his horse, Corn Syrup. They came through in good shape. The editors fortunately neglected to note a startling similarity to a story I sold them a year ago. Cornflakes Rides Again. *His* horse's name was Molasses. I paid my room-rent, and Obie's commission, and I have this budding fortune left. Next week I get ten bucks for a confirmation speech. Ha. It's great to be a playwright."

"I'm so glad, Dale," she said. "It's starting. Some day you'll laugh at all this. You'll see."

"We're going to celebrate. Wine. I owe you a good meal."

"No. Not on this. We'll have plenty of time for that. First we'll do a bit of shopping. You need some shirts, and ties, and probably underwear. We'll eat at the Automat and go to a movie afterwards."

He held out his arms. "Can I kiss you now? We always seem to get the business details in first. Titles and budgets and things." She stepped toward him and he held her lightly as their lips met.

"I was arguing with Emily Post," she said. "She insisted that I mustn't. I told her we were engaged. We are, aren't we?" Now she knew why she had come. She needed reassurance, something to let her know that her feelings for Dale, and his for her, were real. You spend an innocuous evening with a fellow like Hank and it starts you thinking. After a few restless nights you don't know. You just don't know. And it's pretty important to find out.

"Some day," he said, "I want you to relax, to take your elbows away from the front of your body, and to let me hold you as if you were mine. So far we're all words,

you belong to me and love is everlasting, and then when I want to get close to you you start hiding behind the furniture."

She shook her head. "No. I'm not like that. I want to loosen up and sometimes I think I can, but I have to feel it, deep inside of me. Otherwise I can't." But she was beginning to feel it now, the urge to let herself go, and she was afraid. "Come on," she said. "Let's go. I'm—I'm hungry."

He closed his typewriter with a bang. "Lovely," he said, his tone mocking. "Fain would I swoon in your arms, my hero, but the veal-chops are beckoning and I must away." He buttoned the collar of his shirt, adjusted his tie, smoothed his hair with a towel, and put on his coat.

After they reached the street she put her hand on his. "Dale," she said, her voice low, "you must know it wasn't that. Food. I'm not like that. I was scared. I can't help it. I'm full of inhibitions. You know that. Sometimes desire steps in, and I sit back and watch the struggle. So far background has been winning over reason. But you mustn't ridicule me. Please."

He patted her hand. "You're a swell kid. No wonder I'm fond of you. Well. Come on. We're going to celebrate. Wine. Good red wine, for the passions we stifle."

"Shirts," she said. "The one you're wearing now is frayed. Why didn't you change?"

"The other one is at the laundry."

She looked at him severely, then steered him into a haberdashery shop. "Two shirts," she said. "Size—what size?"

"Shirts are an unimportant part of an idealist's existence," he insisted. He turned to the clerk. "Fourteen and

a half. Whenever the lady orders the shirts the size is fourteen and a half."

She made the selection, then got two ties, and some underwear. Dale stood by, as if resigned to his fate. "You haven't some ladies' hose?" he asked, suddenly. The clerk shook his head.

She nudged him with her elbow. "Stop it. You're not buying anything for me. Come on."

He paid for the packages and they left the store. "Six dollars gone," he said. "It's sheer insanity, wasting money that way."

"Isn't it?" she said. "We could have bought a dozen orchids."

"Something like that. Something worth while."

"Now for shoes. You can get a nice pair for the other six dollars."

"Wait. You can't do this to me. I'm not used to being sensible. I don't enjoy it. I've bought enough for the next ten years. After that I may have twelve dollars all over again. How about eating?"

"Not yet. I'm excited, inside. Something fluttering. Let's walk. Work up an appetite."

"Walking, hey. Always some new fads." He took her arm and they went east on Fourteenth Street, toward the river. "Ho hum, I'm glad I finished that one-act thing. Now I can get back to my real work."

"How is it coming along?"

"Swell. It's alive, Connie, real. It can't miss. I reread parts I've written, as if they were by somebody else, and I say, boy, that's good. I feel it. I can sit back and judge, as though it weren't mine. And it's good. I know."

"Dale," she said disturbed, "don't. Let others judge. If it's good they'll say so. I don't like it, coming from you."

"That's silly. If I could jump six feet and I told you I could jump six feet, would that be conceit, or a fair estimate of my ability? Where does ego end and honesty begin?"

"You can't put a tape measure to your plays."

"*You* can't," he said doggedly. "I can. I read plays, more perhaps than any man alive, and I know which are good and which aren't. I can appraise my own as critically as the others. They're good, I tell you." He paused for a while, thinking. "Anyhow," he went on, "there's another thing. You can't go on, working your guts out the way I do, without success, unless you believe, and believe strongly. If you stop you're through, and you might as well go hunting for a job as a soda-jerker."

"Not you. You can keep your head in the clouds."

"Over and over," he said. "I have to keep telling myself, and telling others, so that I can believe in myself and keep them believing in me. And of course there's such a thing as publicity. Don't think that hurts. They know who I am. Dale Edwin. Dale Edwin. If they don't hear it elsewhere they hear it from me. Rising brilliant young playwright. Edwin. Seems to me I've heard the name before."

"I don't know," she said. "I don't think I like it."

"Listen. Did you ever hear of the calends of April?"

"The what?"

"The calends of April. Or the nones of June. No. Nobody has. But they all know the ides of March. Why? It's been publicized, by another pretty fair playwright. That's what I mean. The calends of April, or September, are just as important, or as unimportant, but people haven't found out about it. Well, they're going to know

about me. I'm not going to be the flower that's born to blush unseen."

"There must be other ways," she said, uncertainly. "Nicer ways. And what is a calend?"

"A day of settlement. A new day. Actually, it's the beginning of the Roman month. The ides are somewhere around the middle. That's all."

"Well," she said, "at least I learned that."

They could feel the cooler breezes drifting toward them from the river. They walked in silence for a while. Then he said, "You're really very pretty, Connie."

"Thanks." They were at the docks now, her heels making sharp clicking sounds on the hollow wood. They stepped to the edge and looked over into the dark water. A small boat drifted silently by, its warning lights blinking in the haze that was forming. She put up the collar of her coat.

"Cold?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I like it here. It's dirty and it's romantic. Even the stars need a bit of polishing." She took long breaths of the sharp air. "It's funny, how some things touch you and some just slip by. Everything I did in South America seems like a dream, animals staring at me out of the darkness, not a hundred yards away, meaning nothing to me, not even fear, and now it seems as if something were being woven that will last forever." She shook her head, slowly. "The muddy East River, and rotting boats crunching through the water, and me cold and hungry, and my escort telling me how clever he is, and somehow it's all part of me, and I love it."

"It's the setting," he said. "You hang an aluminum moon over a dumpheap and you think you're in Elysium. And I said nothing at all about myself. It was you, all you."

You have a glow, Connie. You try desperately to hang on to your coldness, and something underneath is straining." He put his arm around her shoulder and she stayed close to him.

"Let's sit," she said, pointing to the heavy rails that formed the guarding barrier at the edge of the dock.

He brushed the timbers with his hands. "It's dirty." He put his package down. "Here. Sit on this."

"Not on your shirts. Your new shirts."

"It won't hurt them. Keep them nice and flat." She sat down gingerly. He grinned. "Something romantic about sitting on six dollars' worth of underwear."

"I usually do," she said, smiling, "only it's my own."

"I wouldn't know."

"No. You wouldn't. It's really about two dollars' worth, if you must know, maybe three when I'm all dolled up."

He sat next to her and let his hand move across her soft cheek. Her skin was smooth and young and clear. He liked that. He watched her as she gazed intently out across the water. She *was* pretty, nice even features and a glow that made her look like a scrubbed child. And not cold, not as cold as he'd always suspected. She could loosen up, if she would only let herself. Her eyes were alight now, alert, alive, and her cheeks were shining. She was beautiful. Strange that he hadn't noticed it before, but she was beautiful. Or was it the dim lights, the atmosphere, and his aluminum moon? He leaned toward her and touched his lips to her soft cheek. She didn't move. Now he held her shoulder and he could feel her closer to him than before, could hear her soft breathing. A passing boat tooted its warning whistle. Strange, how a girl who didn't respond could move him

so. What was it? Her very passivity, his desire to be the first to stir her? He shook his head, annoyed at the practical side of himself that insisted on analyzing his emotions. This is a moment, fool, not a class in dialectics. He pressed his lips against her cheek again, and, as she turned her head toward him, let them rest full upon her lips, and he knew that her answering warmth excited him. Perhaps she would go back to his apartment with him. She had gone there, just before, of her own free will, and he had foolishly waved his manuscripts at her instead of holding her, the way he was now.

After a moment she moved away. "This time I *am* hungry," she said.

He laughed. "I suppose if we got really tender you'd tell me your corns hurt."

"I'm cold, too, and I've probably ruined your shirts." She got to her feet and smoothed her skirt. "Come on."

"I think you're ducking out of something," he said, getting up and standing close to her.

"Maybe." She backed away.

He tried to put his arms around her again but her elbows got in the way. "What is it?"

"I don't know. Afraid, I guess." She thought of a girl she once knew whose fiancé insisted on intimacy before their marriage, to learn if they were suited in what he called the most important part of their life together. Apparently she made the grade, because they were married and, as far as Connie knew, lived happily forever after. Perhaps she would have to do something like that. Find out if she really was frigid, as Dale had certainly intimated on occasions. But she couldn't, because she was the sort of person who couldn't. As little as ten minutes ago she thought that she might have let herself go, but now she

knew that she couldn't. Those strange urges don't last long enough, and before you can do anything about them your common sense, or the common sense of your many grandmothers, rushes to your rescue.

"What are you afraid of?" Dale was asking. "Life? You're alive, living, and it's all part of the pattern. I'd be afraid of only one thing, dying, and to me not living is dying."

"Words," she said. "A lot of words strung together, and very likely they have some meaning."

"Here we are, two people, call us what you will, playwrights or poets or preachers or fools. There's only one thing that counts, and that is that you're a woman and I'm a man. The rest is all poppycock, whether you can sew or sing or turn triple somersaults, or I grovel in the dust or soar in the clouds. Either there's the attraction of one sex for the other, or there isn't."

"Hands pawing," she said. "I don't like it."

"It sounds ugly only when you use ugly words to describe it."

"Can't you be fond of a man at ten paces?"

"What a man."

"I mean it. Can't you feel anything when some one you love speaks to you over the telephone?"

"Sure, but that's a substitution, the vicarious thrill that one knows will be supplemented by reality."

She shook her head. "I told you we come from a long line of virgins. I don't know how we ever survived."

"There were nights," he said. "Docks, and muddy waters, and tinsel moons. Moments. Those things happen. You were a different girl a few minutes ago."

"I know." She started from the dock, and he followed her.

"There *was* a spark, wasn't there?"

She nodded. "Yes," she said, softly.

"You wanted to be near me," he went on, "close to me. Didn't you? You wanted me to kiss you, to hold you?"

"Yes. I did. I do now."

He kissed her again, but something had changed. "Prelude to nothing," he said. "Sorry." He turned back to look at the moon. "See? It's lost its spark. They do that in the theatre, dim the moon when the romance is cooling. Shine it up when it gets going, along in the third act. Don't worry. We'll polish it up again." Now he knew that they would have a nice uneventful dinner, and perhaps see a harmless movie, and then he would take her home and leave her at her door, giving her a fatherly kiss before she went upstairs, alone. Funny night. Earlier, things might have happened. But he didn't know, then. And now, when he particularly wanted her, she had gone cold again, like the moon. Well. There were other nights, other moons.

He held her arm gently as they picked their way along the uneven street. He had other girls, girls that annoyed him, that showered their attentions upon him. He never knew, when he returned to his apartment, which of his friends might be waiting there, eager to spend an hour or a night with him. Sometimes they stayed, and sometimes he turned them out. Depending on his mood. And now it was all Connie. Something had happened tonight, and he wanted her as he had never wanted anybody before.

Suddenly she slipped from his arm and hurried back to the docks. He followed her, wondering. Had their moment returned? God, she was an odd girl. Maybe she had other thoughts, suicide, or something as ridiculous

as that. She bent down, out of his sight for a second, and he ran toward her, frightened. Then she straightened up, with a package in her hand. "Isn't that the limit?" she said. "We almost forgot your shirts."

He stood there and laughed, and then threw back his head and laughed some more. The moon slipped behind a cloud and was lost. Her face looked grayer now, the sparkle hidden. She was a sweet young girl, cold and hungry, like thousands of other girls all over the world. That was the way things were. Prelude to nothing. What do you do with a moment after it is gone?

CHAPTER II

"HEY," Martha said, over the phone, "come over tonight, will you? Baxter's going to a class reunion. Have dinner with us, such as it is."

"I'll come after dinner," Connie said. "I have to stay a bit later at the office anyhow. I'm glad you called. I want to discuss things. Problems. I'll be there about nine."

Martha was in an old house-dress when Connie arrived. "This way," she said, regally, leading the way to the bath-room, where she had some pink underwear floating in the suds in the basin. "Sit down." Martha waved a casual hand toward the toilet seat.

"Can't we park in some other room? This place lacks the spiritual touch."

"I have to get my washing done. Wait. I'll move to the kitchen. Come on." She dropped the soaking silk into a bowl and carried it before her. "Just this and a pair of stockings."

"Wednesday night," Connie said. "Stockings and advice to the lovelorn. What sort of reunion is it?"

"Something at the Harvard Club. No charge if you come after dinner. The boys get together and tell how good they are. I hope Baxter's suit looks all right. Ho hum. Nice of you to come. I hate to be alone. I get jittery. I hope these stockings last. What's on your mind? I have plenty of advice, mostly bad."

"That's what I need. Anybody can give good advice."

She stared past Martha. "Do you think I ought to marry Dale?" she asked, suddenly.

Martha let the underwear drop into the basin with a splash. "So that's in the wind again."

"Why not? We're still engaged. There are two ways of ending an engagement. One is marriage."

"I've heard about the other way," Martha said, evenly.

"I know." Connie fumbled with the buttons on her blouse, her fingers uneasy. "Remember that big fellow? Hank. Hank Brady."

"I remember him."

"Nice name, isn't it? Virile, sort of."

"What of it? Are you marrying him or Dale?"

"Dale, so far. I just asked if you remembered Brady."

Martha opened her lips, then closed them again, her eyes on Connie's face. Finally she said, "You like him."

"What?" Connie said, dreamily.

"You like him. Don't you?"

"Hank? There's something sweet about him. Something tender."

Martha nodded. "Tender, hey? A wrestler gone tender. He could probably tear a battleship in half. Does he like you?"

Connie shrugged, non-committal. "I forgot to find out. He remembered my name. That's something, or isn't it?"

"What sort of fellow is he, anyhow? What, for example, does he do for a living?"

"Wrestles, darling. What do wrestlers do?"

"I mean it."

"Sporting-goods. He owns a store. You know, footballs and row-boats and ping-pong tables and things. If you need anything I might be able to get a trifling discount."

Martha looked up with a faint smile. "I could use a ~~row-boat~~," she said. "I don't know how I managed to get along without a row-boat. Tell me. I'm not up on sporting-goods stores. Does it keep him dressed, and fed?"

"He probably gets along."

Martha squinted through the stockings at the light. "Do you like him?"

"He's nice."

"He's six feet tall, he weighs two hundred pounds, and when he walks he carefully puts one foot in front of the other. I asked you a question."

"He weighs a hundred and ninety," Connie said.

Martha grinned in her exasperation. "What do you do, go around weighing him?"

"He's six one," Connie said, seriously. "He used to jump center for the All-Stars."

"Just what I wanted to know." She heaved a long sigh. "Do you like him?"

"Do you?"

"Yes, I do. For God's sakes, Connie, is it possible to get an answer out of you? You want to know if I like him. I say, yes. That, my pet, is a positive answer. Not a single remark about the sunset on the Sahara, or the twinkle in the milk-man's eye. Now, try, will you? It's relatively simple."

"Four score and seven years ago," Connie said, dramatically, "our forefathers brought forth something or other, with malice toward none, and cannons to left of them, and they're hanging Danny Deever in the morning. This charming poem by Constance Gwynn Rawlings was awarded first prize in a moderately sane contest, and will be inscribed on the head of a pin. Is there anything else?"

"No. No. Possibly you do omit one or two trifling details but we'll ignore that. Now, tell me about Dale."

Connie took a deep breath. "I think we're going places, Martha," she said.

Martha turned toward her quickly. "I'm not sure I like the way you say that."

"Maybe we shouldn't have started this. I'll recite another poem, if you'd rather."

"You'll do nothing of the sort. It's a major victory if I get you to admit it's a nice day." She took the stockings out of the suds and let them drip. "Why can't we talk? I'm a lot older than you. Haven't I the right to say anything?"

"You don't like Dale," Connie said, in a low voice. "I can tell. Why? I want you with me on anything I do. What have you against him?"

Martha sat down next to the basin, and shook her head slowly. "Nothing. It isn't Dale. It's—this." She held the stockings before her. "I don't mind being down to my last pair of stockings, but I don't want it to happen to you. I can see you both, Dale, with his head in the clouds, and you rushing through breakfast because it will suddenly become important to be at the office on time. Don't I know. Marry a man to support him temporarily and you're embarking on your life career."

"Not us. It won't turn out that way," Connie said, with confidence. "I'm not afraid of that part."

"Why can't you wait? You don't have to rush into anything."

"I'll do the wrong thing, sooner or later. Don't you worry about that."

"Stay sane. Hang on for a while. Dale's a shooting star, but he's headed for destruction. I'm beginning to develop a weakness for sporting-goods stores."

Connie got up and walked across the room, thinking. Then she came back again, listening to the creak of the loose boards in the floor. "Maybe it's wrong, comparing Dale with Bax. It's so different. Dale is on his way up, up. He'll never admit defeat. He's going to do things, big things, I tell you." She pushed the curtains back and looked out at the night. "He sparkles, like champagne. It may be confidence or it may be conceit, but it keeps him going. That's something, isn't it?"

"I'd like to read one of his plays," Martha said. "I don't go for that bubbling stuff so much. How are they?"

"Good, in spots. They may miss somewhere along the line. Too much that's jumbled, chaotic. His characters don't breathe, they walk on air, they don't vibrate. They don't smell. But he'll straighten it all out, I know. Maybe I've been sold. You hear how good a person is, over and over, and you start believing it. Publicity. Did *you* ever hear of the calends of April?"

"The what?"

"I must remember to look it up. It means something or other. Dale said so. Anyhow, it proved a point. I can't remember what."

"Maybe it's something you buy at a sporting-goods store."

"Maybe." She thought for a moment. "I'm sorry, about what I said about Bax."

Martha waved the apology away. "I've learned to accept certain things. Hiding them doesn't make them better or worse."

Connie bit her lip. "It doesn't have to happen to everybody."

"Sure. But there's no harm in trying to prevent it. We've a lot in common. I can see you in twelve years, looking like me, acting like me. I can't say I like it."

"Stop it," Connie said, sharply. "You, fretting about your age. If I look like that at thirty-eight I'll be pretty well pleased with myself."

"You get old inside," Martha said. "What difference do a few pounds or wrinkles make? You don't feel like fighting any longer. You look out of the higher windows and wonder if it hurts when you hit the pavement. They say you die before you even touch the ground. I wonder if that's true?"

"Oh, stop it," Connie said, impatiently.

Martha stifled a yawn. "It is kind of silly. Well. We're certainly solving problems today. Just now you're going to marry Dale or Brady, or possibly both. I'm glad that's settled. You didn't by any chance want me to advise you?"

"I wanted something. I don't know what. Yes, I do. I wanted you to agree with me."

"Maybe I sound crabby," Martha said, slowly, "but I can't help thinking of myself. I had hopes, ambitions. I wanted to be somebody, somebody big. Produce plays, or run a dress shop, anything to lift me the least bit above the average girl. Now I type bills. Four cases of green-peas at two-forty a case. Terms one percent ten days or thirty days net. Twenty-eight bucks a week, and mighty welcome it is too. Why should you do it?"

"I'll be sitting on top of the world. Don't you worry about me."

"O. K. I made my little speech. How about some coffee?"

Connie got up. "Not for me. Thanks. I'm going. I'm tired. We never accomplish much, do we?"

"It's my fault. I drag in my own troubles. Wait a minute. If I don't get this off my chest I'll never forgive myself." She put her hand on Connie's arm and looked at

her as if in prayer. "Don't do it, Connie. Don't throw your life away. You deserve more than that. Hang on for a while. See how Dale makes out. It isn't something you have to do today or never. I don't mind Dale's being out of work. It's this damned artist-in-the-family attitude. Support me, brethren, for I am a genius. You don't have to pass any tests to be a genius. You just curl up in a chair and decide for yourself. And from that point on the world owes you a living."

"Where's my coat?"

"Baxter wasn't like that. He lost his confidence. That's what ruined him. Fear of failure. But he tried. Anything, everything. And Dale won't. That's what I have against him. He's an artist. Fine. Why can't he be an artist between five-thirty and ten-thirty at night? If there's anything in him it'll come out, early or late. Meanwhile he can earn a few honest dollars. Am I being silly?"

"He works," Connie said, impatiently. "He's put in plenty of twelve-hour days. He doesn't even stop to eat when he's going right. What do you want him to do? Type bills? Maybe I'm a bit silly, too, but I wouldn't want it. He has a right to his life, the same as we have to ours. Maybe he's no damned good as a playwright. I wouldn't know. Somehow it doesn't matter."

Martha held the coat as Connie slipped into it. "At least that settles that. What made you bring your wrestler into the discussion?"

"Just to see what you'd say. There's more to Hank than meets the eye. Sweet things, bits of courtesy. When he says Yes you invariably wait for the Ma'am." She sighed and shook her head. "He'd be perfect if you wanted a bureau moved or a lady rescued from a burning building."

"I suppose he wouldn't fit in a triolet. He has the

homely virtues, and a suit of clothes with an extra pair of pants. He wears a clean collar and gets a hair-cut every other Friday, and his name is Hank. I'd hang on to a guy like that."

"Maybe I will. I promise to give it a lot of semi-serious thought before I do the wrong thing." Martha held the door open and Connie stood on the threshold for a moment before stepping out into the hall. "Remember Dad's story about old Mr. Crocker? He hesitated about marrying that woman with the wooden leg. Dad said, Suppose you marry a healthy young girl and she gets run over and loses a leg, you'll have doctor bills and trouble no end, and a wife with a wooden leg, while here you get one ready-made, no bother, no expense." She smiled as Martha nodded, remembering. "That's the way I am. I can start with my burdens, like old man Crocker. That's something, isn't it?"

"Don't be so smart," Martha said. "Dad had some sense but I fail to see where you inherited your share. Well. Take care of yourself. So long." She kissed Connie lightly. "I hope Bax gets home soon." She closed the door and went back to the living-room, then pulled the curtains to one side and looked out of the window. Five stories. She'd never do it. Not while there was hope. You don't have to keep your eyes down on the grim pavement. If you bent low you could catch a glimpse of the stars over the edge of the roof across the narrow alley. But you had to keep your head up, the way Connie did. The way Dale did. Maybe that was something after all. She sighed in her weariness and sat back in the soft creaky chair to wait for Baxter.

CHAPTER 12

AFTER you leave the heavier traffic of the city you can turn into the Post Road and drive in peace for a while. The tiny lights dotting the road rush as if to meet you, then vanish abruptly into the darkness. Soft breezes trickle through the open window and bathe your face with the night. Sleepy semaphores veer from red to green and you let the car slip gracefully into gear and hum along, ready to pause for breath at the next warning signal. A new world has formed, a gentle world, a world free of trouble and soothed by the soft rhythm of your gliding chariot.

"I love it," Dale said. "A borrowed car is particularly restful. You spin along on a magic carpet with never a thought of the next installment."

Connie sat back and could feel her body purr in tune with the car. "It was nice of Obie to let you have it."

"Nice? It was a major feat. He can get awfully crabby. The last time I borrowed it—" he peered up the road, thinking, "—say, that's right. The last time we almost got into trouble."

She could feel her body go stiff. That was the way Dale was, hurting you with his thoughtless choice of words. "We did, didn't we?" she managed to say.

He patted the bulging pocket of his coat. "I think I still have it here, buried among three deathless scenes and a Cowboy Waffles climax. The advantages of owning

only one suit. Whatever you have is in it." Dale watched the white lines of the road as if they had suddenly become important. "A car is a necessary adjunct of romance. You can't make love in the city streets. The Police Commissioner doesn't like it."

"I don't like it," she said, shortly.

"O. K.," he said, complacently. "It's too nice a night to review your faults and virtues. I know your shortcomings by this time."

"Don't plague me. You keep at a thing until you wear it thin. Switch to your favorite topic. America's greatest playwright."

"Is it as bad as that?" he asked, cheerfully. "Sometimes we don't scrap. Sometimes we get along real well." He let his right hand slip from the wheel and drop carelessly against her knee. "It's too lovely tonight. There's our scene, the sky still warm from the setting sun, and lights too small and timid to frighten away that tender feeling. Can't you sense it, Connie, coming over us the way it did that night? Soft lights, hushed music, as in a play, just like our East River scene, water lapping against the docks and night not quite ready to fall, and you, soft and sweet and a million miles away from your lukewarm grandmothers. You were different then, sweet. We melted that night, didn't we? Something happened, underneath, and you dragged yourself back to a mundane world and a package of shirts. I wanted to hold you then, more than anything in all the world. You wanted it too."

She moved uneasily. "How did you know?"

"It was there, written all over your face. And over mine. You might have been talking about the weather, and I about my creaking third act. It didn't matter. The important things were the things we didn't say. And it's

happening again. The same sort of night, and you close to me, and the car humming our music, as if a director had staged it all. I wouldn't be surprised if you were hungry."

"I am, at that," she said, laughing. "I always am, at the wrong time."

He eased the pressure on the accelerator as they approached a sign-post in the road. "Greenwich," he read, as he peered through the dim light. "The city of easy marriage."

She glanced back but could distinguish only the bare outline of the sign. "It doesn't say that, does it?"

"Not in so many words. Actually, it said, South Corners, fourteen miles. You must learn to read between the lines. The words you imagine are always more interesting." He pointed to another sign. "That might read, Stop. Sheltered Nook. If it doesn't it should." He swung the wheel and let the car slide to a stop at the side of the road. "Sometimes the signs say, Soft Shoulders." He put his arm around her and pressed her gently. "I always wondered if that meant what I hoped it did."

She let his hand rest against her. What difference could it make? She could lean toward him, or away. One was acquiescence, the other rebuff. She sat there, tense, wondering if she could relax. No. Not tonight. Somehow it was different. Things were more natural than other evening. This time it was a set, a painted set, cardboard trees bowing clumsily and organdy clouds wavering in a canvas sky. Only his hand was real, his hand on her shoulder, holding her gently, affectionately. Why not? It was restful, peaceful. She could feel some of the stiffness go out of her body.

He sensed it, and tried to pull her closer. "Let yourself

go," he urged. "Be normal, natural. Forget your inhibitions for tonight."

"It's not my mind," she said, as if apologizing. "*I've* accepted things, long ago. It's that maternal grandmother. *She* wasn't enlightened."

"I know. She's been taking the blame for a long time. Never you."

"Something grips me. What can I do about it? Recite the logic you've taught me? I try. It doesn't work."

"It must, sometimes. You were different, that other night. Warm, passionate. Alive."

"It was the wine," she said, defensively.

"The wine we never had. We'd only talked about it."

She laughed nervously. "That was enough for me. I don't have to drink. I get silly on moonlight and lapping water."

"You were swell then. Soft and lovely, and acknowledging it. For a while, anyhow. Now you're fighting it. Fighting the fact that you're a woman."

"I'm not fighting. I can't help it. There's some inner defense struggling to keep me pure. Something I can't control."

"That's exactly it. The importance of being pure." He let his arm slip from her shoulder, as in surrender to her wishes. Then he leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, peering into the darkness. "After the proper words are spoken," he said, thoughtfully, "the defense crumbles."

She turned her head sharply. "What was that?"

"The city of easy marriage." He turned toward her, his hand gripping her thigh. "We move each other. We do, don't we, darling? What else counts? How many people are there in the world who can say that? Ten? Twenty? Perhaps you and I and no one else. There's a new feeling

when we're together, something we've created, you and I. Something that doesn't exist with us as individuals. There's no getting around it. I love you, Connie. I'm a strange sort of sap. You know that. I'm one of these sophisticated ducks who can scorn the homely virtues of marriage and fireplaces and tousled kiddies. Well, laugh at me if you want to. I love you. I love you, darling. I never say that, Connie. Never. Here we are, ready for each other, wanting each other, and a ridiculous barrier is separating us. We can get married, here and now."

"No," she said, tensely, remembering the five days that had balked them the other time.

"Why? The feeling's there. I know it and you do too. It's one of those things, here and now, or it's gone forever."

"No," she said, biting her lip. "Not yet."

"Why?"

His fingers hurt her. "I don't know." She passed her hand across her forehead, trying to think. "I can't. I mustn't decide, like this." She wanted him to hold her, to press her body close to his. She knew she wanted that. But that wasn't enough. She wanted to kiss him, to run her fingers through his hair. But you don't marry a person for that. "I have to think," she said.

"Don't let common sense get in your way. It has a habit of ruining lives. You'll never go wrong if you act on inspiration."

"I—I don't know," she said, wondering why her head was splitting. Here and now. That was the way she did things. All at once or not at all. Why not? That wasn't easy to answer, either. Why was her head spinning, so that she couldn't think clearly? If she could pull herself together . . . He must want her, and wanting her, must

love her. I love you, Connie, I love you. When he said it that way you knew he meant it. Then what was there to decide? If you love a person, and he loves you . . .

They could live in her apartment, nicer by far than Dale's, at virtually no added expense. They could get along so nicely, for the present, and then, of course, when he got going, they would spin through time and space at a dizzy pace. They'd be happy, crazily, feverishly happy. She could get new curtains, hand-blocked chintz, maybe, and Wedgwood china for the oak cupboard, and a white candlewick bedspread. New things to give them the feeling that they were just starting. And they *would* be happy. They would.

"I know," he said. "You must too, Connie. It's all or nothing." He put his arms around her and held his face close to hers. She lifted her lips and he kissed her for a long time. His hands moved across her jacket until they slipped inside and pressed warmly against her breasts. His kisses were soft and sweet, and all the tenseness went out of her body, and then she thought that she knew the answer.

They drove silently, Connie huddled against him as if she were afraid of what was to come, and Dale staring straight ahead, wondering if he would find what he wanted. They said there were plenty of them along this road. His heart was pounding. Then he saw it, hanging brazenly on a curved iron pedestal. JUSTICE OF THE PEACE. He pulled up to the side of the house. There was a brass knocker on the door, and he hesitated for a moment, then pounded boldly.

After a few minutes a burly man opened the door a crack. "What do you want?"

"Can a fellow get married here?" Dale found his confidence returning.

The man in the doorway rolled his sleeves down, mechanically, as if preparing for his job. "Got your license?"

"Right here," Dale said, patting his pocket. Connie followed him, slowly, nervously.

"Don't see why not," the man said. "That's what we're here for."

He stepped inside and let them through the door. Dale took a bold stride forward and then seemed to remember Connie and reached back and took her arm. There was a little light in the hall and a brighter light in the room ahead. "Milsen is the name," the man said. "Right in there."

"All right, Doctor," Dale said.

"*Mister* Milsen. Justice of the Peace of Fairfield County. Glad to be of service. Come along, miss."

"Wait," Dale said. "What will it cost? I don't think we have much money. With us."

Mr. Milsen looked at them critically. "Twenty dollars."

"Good-bye," Dale said, starting for the door.

"Make it ten," Mr. Milsen said, quickly. "You look like a couple of good kids."

Dale turned to Connie. "How much have you?"

She opened her purse with trembling fingers. So that's the way you get married. Bargain about the price. Nice. Nice and romantic. Something to tell the children. Some day. He wanted ten but we got it for eight. There were a couple of bills there but she wasn't sure about their denomination. She pulled them out and handed them to Dale.

"O. K.," he said. "Two fivers. Let's go."

"Have you a witness?" Mr. Milsen asked, firmly.

Dale moved his hands in a helpless gesture. "Nobody came in with us."

"You need a witness," he insisted.

"How much for the witness?" Dale fished in his pocket and dragged out two crumpled bills.

Mr. Milsen tried to get a better look at the money. Ones. He could see they were ones. "My wife will be happy to officiate," he said. "Any gratuity will be acceptable."

"All right," Dale said. "Feed her and bring her in."

Connie sat down weakly. It was as if they were buying a horse. Next Mr. Milsen would trot her up and down the living-room and count her teeth. Ten dollars, Mr. Milsen would say. No, not ten dollars for my wife. *My wife*. She could feel the catch of her breath. Dale wouldn't sell her, not for ten dollars, he wouldn't. No, sir, Dale would shout, not *my* wife for ten dollars. Twelve fifty is the least. She doesn't breathe so good, Mr. Milsen would say. Her left eye is a little off kilter. Ten dollars is a mighty good price for a wife these days. Well, all right, Mr. Milsen, take her for the tenner. I'm right sorry to let her go. She was a good wife while she lasted.

"Ar-lene!" Mr. Milsen was shouting up the stairs. "Ar-lene!"

Arlene came to the head of the stairs. "What do you want?" she called, in a shrill voice.

"Wedding," he shouted back. "Get your things on."

Soon Arlene would come down and from that point on everything would be official. Mr. Milsen would use the proper words, for surely he had done this sort of thing before, and they would sign papers and things and when they left his home they would be man and wife, until death do us part. But nothing had happened yet, and she could get out so easily. A quick shift, the way Hank used to

dart down a football field, and duck neatly by Mr. Milsen and around Dale and out of the door, and then she could hide in the darkness and they would never find her. Or if they did she could swallow the two five-dollar bills and Mr. Milsen would never marry them because he was first and foremost a practical man. Romance was not part of his life, something you could sense when you heard Arlene's voice. The money, he would scream, you've swallowed the money! But it was all too silly. So she sat there, pressing her hands until they hurt, and marvelling at her preposterous schemes.

Arlene came down the stairs, attired in black, her marrying costume, and by this time Mr. Milsen had adjusted his sleeves and was putting on his jacket, just an ordinary dark jacket which he used for the ten-dollar weddings. "You're both of legal age and so forth?" Mr. Milsen said. "You say you have a license?"

Dale handed it to him. "In good health," Dale said, "and in full possession of our faculties."

"Stand over there."

They stood shoulder to shoulder, and Connie realized that she was almost as tall as Dale. Hank would tower over her, standing there. But of course he wasn't standing there.

Mrs. Milsen took her place opposite them, facing Connie so that she could scowl at her throughout the ceremony. All part of one of the cheaper weddings. What do you expect for ten dollars, smiles? Somebody had married Arlene and Mr. Milsen, once upon a time, and now they were out to get their revenge on the rest of humanity. Mr. Milsen had a Bible-stand, and he opened the book in a perfunctory manner and mumbled a few words, while Arlene nodded her head in silent approval. Over in the

corner a clock kept ticking, ticking louder than the drone of Mr. Milsen's voice. Dale fumbled for her hand, a little uncertain about that part of the ceremony.

"—the power granted to me by the State of Connecticut—" Mr. Milsen was saying. He was well under way, going nicely. But nothing was binding until the final words, somewhere along the way she would have to say, I do, and then she could leap up instead and tell them it was all a joke, what was she doing in Fairfield County and in Mr. Milsen's home, of all places, why it was ridiculous and anybody could tell that just by looking at her. Tick-tock. Tick-tock. That clock again. It needed oil, or something, whatever it is that clocks need when they tick too loudly. It was becoming plaintive, a sort of wail, it was Hank, she could hear it clearly now, Hank crying, you can't, Connie, you can't, Connie, you can't. Of course I can't, Hank, I'm not like that, I wouldn't do it, you know I wouldn't, Hank. Only I'm doing it. I started something, a bit of moonlight and water lapping against a pier, and now I don't know how to turn back. I don't even know if I want to. Every word now is a link in a chain Mr. Milsen is forging around me, and I have to escape before the last one is sealed, or I will be bound forever. And I'm standing here, taking it, because I don't know what else to do. Standing here, with the old dame staring at me, her eyes glued to my middle. No, dear, I'm not expecting a baby tomorrow or even next week. This is one of those perfectly respectable weddings, no artillery bringing up the rear. I'm merely running away from my own emotions. Oh, you never heard of that before, did you now? Well, neither did I. I just made it up. You have to give these things a title. Like childhood conditioning, or schizophrenia, or something. Something to lend dignity

to a crazy whim when it carries you along so rapidly that you don't know how to turn back.

"—under the laws of God and of the State of Connecticut—"

Nice of you, Mr. Milsen, to work God into this, at no extra charge. God. It was funny. God arranges these things. If she hadn't had the ten dollars all this wouldn't be happening, and if it didn't, tonight, you wondered if it ever would. Five more days would pass, the way they did last time, and then Dale would have other things on his mind for a long time, and then Obie's car might be lost or stolen, and they would never get around to it again. But Mr. Milsen was talking, talking, in his practised monotone, and she was accepting it, knowing that they were getting closer and closer to the grand finale. She would say, I do, and perhaps Dale would remember to kiss her, and then they would go back to her apartment, and Dale would clamber into her bed, and this time she would have to let him, because he would have the papers clutched tightly in his hand, the laws of God and of the State of Connecticut, and there's nothing you can do about that, because even if you don't respect God's laws you must at least defer to the State of Connecticut.

All because she had ten dollars in her purse, and Obie had lent them his precious car, and the moon was warm and Dale said a few things that he might have meant, or perhaps he was practising for one of his plays. But there they were, Mr. Milsen still speaking, trying valiantly to earn his ten bucks, and dear Arlene a very fine witness too, as witnesses go, and at a certain point he would say, Do you? And if you haven't made up your mind by that time you are lost, the captain shouted, as he staggered down the stairs. Maybe he'd settle for five dollars and call

the whole thing off. Will you, Mr. Milsen? We'll send all our friends to you if you do. Just let Arlene get back to her nightie, and we'll apologize and be on our way, and five bucks is five bucks, isn't it now?

"To love," said Mr. Milsen, "to honor, and to cherish, through sickness and health, through poverty and riches—"

Arlene moved closer to her husband and nudged him. He looked up at her. "Do you?" she whispered, so that you could hear her in the next county.

He coughed apologetically. It was coming. He looked at Dale. "Your name?"

"Dale Edwin."

"Do you, Dale Edwin, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife?"

Dale glanced at Connie, as if to be sure that he was getting the right one. "I do," he said.

Mr. Milsen glared at Connie. "Your name?"

She could hear the sound as she swallowed. "Constance Gwynn Rawlings."

"And do you, Constance Gwynn Rawlings, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband?"

At this point the hero rides into the house on his big white horse. *Stop this marriage, that villain has four wives and seven children, I love this damosel, I and I alone, young Lochinvar come out of the West.* Praise be, young Lochinvar, you have saved me from a fate worse than death, I was tricked by an aluminum moon and a tinselly speech, it is you I love, you, Hank, that is, Lochinvar, something has slipped, somewhere, but of course it won't go on. I can hear the hoof-beats, in the distance, closer now, closer, coming right to this room, tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock.

They were all looking at her. Mr. Milsen's last words

came back to her. Your lawfully wedded husband, question mark. She wet her lips. "I do," she said, softly.

Mr. Milsen waited a tense moment for some startling occurrence, an irate wife rushing in, or a hysterical father, or the state police, but nothing happened, so he said, suddenly, abruptly, "I pronounce you man and wife," and slammed his book to let them know that it was over.

Dale put his arms around her, clumsily, embarrassed, as if he were Hank, and his mouth pressed the side of her face, and then she turned so that his lips could meet hers, and they stayed that way for what seemed a long time. Mr. Milsen was scratching away at his desk, and the big clock kept ticking mournfully, but it was too late, too late, Hank, no use bursting in now, we're all signed and sealed and delivered. Mr. Milsen has performed one of his finest ceremonies, and it's over now, all over.

Mr. Milsen had finished, indeed, and now he presented the certificate to Connie with pride, a job well done. That was probably the signal to pay him, for she noticed that Dale was handing him the bills, and he nodded and smiled his thanks, and shook hands with both of them, and then Dale gave Mrs. Milsen his last two dollars and she took them with her same grim smile.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Milsen," he said. "You were a very fine witness."

"Good-bye, children," she said, staring at Connie's stomach. "Good luck to both of you."

"Good-bye," Connie said, wondering if she could add, we'll name the baby Arlene. But she couldn't, because her eyes were misty and her voice seemed to catch, and next thing she knew the tears were streaming down her face and Dale helped her out into the cool night air.

Book Two

PRELUDE TO NOTHING

CHAPTER I

THEY were going to be happy, blissfully, crazily happy. There was no doubt about that. Problems? Sure there would be problems, just as there are in the life of every newly married couple. But Dale and Connie were different. They could skip blithely over the troubles in their path, and come to rest on the happy mad intervals. It was ridiculous to think that sudden marriage must end in failure. Look at them, counting their days together, some days soft and golden as the sunset that smiled at their departure, and other sharp days, days that snapped to a close like an angry book. Seven of them had passed, seven days of assorted shapes and moods, and you could look back and realize that you're virtually a veteran now, married a whole week. Yes, children, seven long days, and the first lovely glow of marriage is still with us, proving what we already know, that what we have is for all time, for long and happy years that reach far and dreamily into our future.

Of course there were things, little things, but Connie knew that she could be sensible enough to brush them aside like the troublesome scraps left over from a perfect meal. Dale was Dale. Not an ordinary human being. Well, silly, was that good or bad? Did she want her man cut from a pattern, moulded to suit the fancy of the average scatter-brained wife? No. The answer was certainly

no. Dale was an individual, a person apart. That was one of the reasons for loving him. He was abrupt at times, self-centered at times, lost in a world of his own that often failed to find a comforting corner for her. Well, well, you poor child. If you found an ordinary man who shaved every day and who had an extra blue serge suit and who remembered diligently to kiss you morning and night you might tolerate him for as much as a month and then run shrieking from his presence. Dale was different, a live, lovable, human individual, and never would they lapse into the doldrums of the ordinary so-called happy married couple. Never. They were what they were, people who could get more real solid enjoyment out of a quarrel than most folks could out of a party. They were going to have great times together.

A week. You like to look back and think about that. A whole week, the most important week in a girl's life. They were married on a Saturday night. That Sunday they slept late, a lazy lovely Sunday morning, and then she prepared a wedding breakfast, squeezing a few extra oranges because she naturally hadn't prepared anything the night before. How could she have suspected? But it turned out nice, with the bacon fried to a crisp and the toast delicately browned, and the coffee perking cheerfully at them as they started their eggs. After breakfast Dale put his arms around her and kissed her and held her close to him, and then he got fully dressed and went over to his old room to get his clothes and things. In the afternoon they took a long walk, up to Central Park and through it, a long slow lovers' walk, and he talked about his plans, and about themselves, and what would happen to them in the years to come, and it was all so sweet and exciting, and after a while she felt the tiredness creeping through her legs and

feet, a soft pleasant sort of tiredness, and they sat on one of the benches and bought chocolate ice-cream cones from a passing vendor. You wouldn't think little things could leave you as happy as that.

Then Monday you had to go back to work, because you hadn't arranged to take any sort of honeymoon, and it was a bad time for vacations anyhow, so you let your life merge into the uneventful lives of the other girls at the office, you bursting to tell them your important news but putting it off to the time when you could get away for at least a week or so. You realize that it isn't a bad idea to leave your new husband during the day. There are adjustments to be made, and this would make them easier, so Dale stayed home and did whatever it was a husband does without his wife, and Connie spent an otherwise important day in a manner no different from other Mondays. But in the evening they had chow mein, crisp and tender and tasty, in a friendly quiet place just off Sixth Avenue. That was nice, just different enough from the ordinary supper to keep their first week on a loftier plane. You can really spend a happy and exciting honeymoon right in New York if you know what you want to do.

Tuesday morning Dale slept late. She slipped out of bed without waking him, watching his soft quiescent face with a tender feeling. He looked so sweet, so completely relaxed, like a baby lost in innocent dreams. She got ready as quietly as she could, and prepared breakfast for both of them, but he was still asleep when she finished, so she ate alone, propping last night's paper up before her on the breakfast table. After that she leaned over the bed and kissed him gently, looking down at him with a tender feeling, knowing that she loved him very much. That evening they had their supper at a cafeteria on Twenty-third Street,

and they both had pot roast, to give them the feeling of having been married a long long time, and then they went home and listened to the radio, to one of the quiz programs and to some swing music, and then they read the newspapers for a while before going to bed. That was an ordinary evening, not thrilling, not depressing, just one of the many evenings that go to make up a lifetime.

Wednesday she had a little story to tell him about the office. One of the girls had done something or other that had caused a fuss, and she had to introduce new names and personalities to him, people that she knew so well and wanted to talk about, but she noticed that he was listening as if his mind were somewhere else, so she stopped suddenly, and he didn't even ask her how it all came out. Well, that was her own fault. You couldn't expect him to go into a man-sized dither because somebody that he didn't want to know had done something that interested him not at all. He had important things to think about, bringing life and movement to his characters, moulding them into scenes that were more real than life itself. She understood that. She could see that he was restless, and after supper he felt like working, so she read while he toyed with his typewriter, and after a while she got into bed, meaning to wait for him, but she fell asleep in the midst of his sporadic typing, the shaded light still on because they had only the one room.

Thursday, repentant, they visited Martha. They should have done that sooner, but you can't crowd everything into your first short week. Of course Connie had spoken to her over the phone, but after all Martha was the person closest to her in all the world, and it seemed wrong to embark on an adventure so important without making Martha a part of it. But the visit was unsatisfactory, the air tense, no-

body knowing just why, but that was the way it was, and they all seemed greatly relieved when they decided to go home early. There was something too depressing about the whole atmosphere, and Martha was too sweet to Dale, too polite, and Baxter's echoes were just a bit more annoying than usual, and they all shook hands when they left, Connie feeling as if they had barely escaped with their lives. But Dale didn't say anything about it, and they had a pleasant walk home. They were really happiest when they were by themselves.

Friday they went to the movies, like an old married couple, and after they got out they had strawberry ice-cream sodas, and when they reached home Dale made love to her, as if he had been reminded of it by something on the screen, but he was sweet and tender, and you could sense that they were made for each other, that in these few days they had become so very much closer than it would have been possible to imagine, and that it would go on that way, down through the years.

They would have a lovely week-end. Days together, lovely days, days for themselves alone, to spurn the remainder of a crowding world, leaving only their private little corner in which to grow and expand. Saturday was a half-day at the office, and she hurried home, eager, expectant. They were going to have a day and a half together, to relive the excitement of a week ago, to polish it so that it would remain, shiny and clear, in their memory for all time. 'She smiled, ashamed of her silly sentimentality. She, Connie Rawlings, going soft all over like that. Well, that was the way she was. Marriage had certainly done something to her. She took quick eager little steps, as if the few moments she would save were of tremendous importance, and reached the house in a burst of breathless

anticipation. It was empty. Dale was out somewhere, and had left no note. She sat down, upset by the anti-climax, and waited. Waited. Ten minutes. Twenty minutes. An hour. Of course they had made no plans. She should have said something to him, let him know that she expected to spend the afternoon with him. How was he to know? She waited until three o'clock, restless, impatient, hungry, and then decided to have lunch alone. There was nothing unusual about that. She'd done it thousands of times, Saturdays and other days, but never was she as alone as now. It wasn't his fault, but it left her glum, following as it did her hopeful plans of a few hours ago. After eating she couldn't bring herself to go home, so she walked around aimlessly until her feet hurt, then she sat in the park for a while, watching the people who passed her, and wondering if they felt as empty as she did.

Dale was home when she got there. "Hey," he said, cheerfully, "where have *you* been?"

"Oh, just out," she said, casually, and they let it go at that.

That evening they went to the Bridge Club. Of course, it wasn't really an anniversary, but just a week ago they'd been married by a Mr. Milsen up in Greenwich, Connecticut, and bridge didn't seem exactly the way to celebrate an event of such importance. But she didn't object. If Dale had asked her for her preference she didn't know what she would have said. Just a walk in the park, perhaps, and that sounded a bit childish, after a whole week of married life. So they went to the Club, and they stayed much later than they intended to, the way they always did when they played bridge, and they tumbled wearily into bed, Connie so tired that she didn't even bother to brush her teeth. Even the good-night kiss was hasty, sleepy.

The next day was Sunday. Sunday all over again, the second Sunday of their married life. She crept quietly out of bed, surprised to see that it was almost eleven o'clock. Dale was still sleeping, shifting lazily as she upset the balance of the bed, then rolling over and continuing his even breathing. She went into the kitchenette to get breakfast started. After a while she returned to the bedroom and noticed that he had gone to the bath-room. The shower was going full blast, and she could hear him singing at the top of his voice. "Brightly dawns our wedding day, joyous hour we give thee greeting, whither whither art thou fleeting, dum di um dum prithee stay, dum di um dum prithee stay." She stood there, amused, while the singing went on. The rush of water stopped. He was drying himself, still in cheery good voice. "What though mortal joys be hollow, pleasures come if sorrows follow." He came out, wearing only his shorts, his towel draped around his shoulders, and put his arms around her. "Fickle moment," he said, "I was trying to think of the words. Fickle moment, prithee stay. From *The Mikado*."

"I know," she said. "Our class produced it too."

"Let's try it," he suggested. They stood there, he in his ridiculous shorts, holding her close to him, and they sang together. "Brightly dawns our wedding day, joyous hour we give thee greeting, whither whither art thou fleeting, fickle moment, prithee stay."

She moved away, laughing. "I can't keep a tune. They wouldn't even let me be a Japanese school-girl. Come on. Breakfast is ready."

"Wait a second." He slipped into a pair of old slacks and a worn corduroy shirt. "My writing shirt. Can't work without it. I'm full of inspiration this morning. I always get going under a shower." He found a pencil and jotted

a hasty note on a scrap of paper. "I'm bubbling over today. I'm glad we got up early."

"We have so many things to do," she said, doubtfully.

"Things," he said, airily. "There are always things. That's what life is made of. We'll do them some other day. Some rainy Friday in November. That's what I do with tasks. Put them aside, day after day, and finally I forget them." He followed her into the tiny kitchen.

"I don't," she said. She put the eggs and toast before him and poured the coffee. "You'll have to get to know me. I'm the person who gets things done."

"Me too. But not tasks. I'll wear my fingers out pounding a typewriter, but I won't even soil them doing dishes. Art versus industry. I forgot to tell you. I'm the artist."

"You've told me. Today you're to make the great sacrifice, or perhaps it is posterity that will be making it. I want you to take time off from your deathless efforts to help a poor girl in distress."

He finished his coffee and held the cup out for some more. "Connie," he said, seriously, "I'm a queer duck about my work. I do want to ask you one thing. Let me work when I want to. No matter when it is, morning or night or on subways or in bed. I get urges. I want to give in to them. It isn't easy to pick prescribed times and expect to get going. I can't do it. Don't ever talk me out of writing when I'm in the mood. Will you, like a good girl?"

"All right," she said, uncertainly. "Only I suppose I won't know. Do I get any special signals?"

"You'll know." He put down the coffee cup. "I'm not worth living with when I get going."

"So different from other times," she said, sweetly.

He turned toward her, surprised. "Hey," he said.

Then he grinned, and went over and put his arm around her shoulder. "Brightly dawns our wedding day," he sang, softly.

"We're getting along nicely, aren't we? Married a week, and we haven't thrown things yet."

"I'm not the throwing type. I'd get athlete's foot. I sit in a corner and say lovely sarcastic things."

"Not to me," she said. "Not to your darling wife."

"No, sweet." He thought for a moment. "What were those things you wanted done?"

"Curtains," she said, unexpectedly, and then they both laughed. "Curtains. It seems so silly now. I've been fretting about them all week. We need something new in this room. To give it a bridal look. Put ribbons in its hair. Do you see what I mean?"

He looked at the windows. "What color?"

"Ha. You're interested. Can you hang curtains?"

"Sure. Get me a hammer and nails and some witch hazel and adhesive tape. I'm really very handy. So you want art to stop for curtains."

"What were you going to write?" she asked, eagerly. "What were those notes?"

"Oh. Artichokia." He burlesqued his salute. "My hero, Peter Antsinpantz, is torn between love and duty. He loves curtains, but duty obliges him to entertain his wife. It all becomes highly complicated. I think I'll call it, 'Hamlet,' or has that been used before?"

"You're sure you feel all right? That coffee wasn't too strong?"

"I asked you a simple question and we seem to land all over the place. What color curtains?"

"What color do you like?"

"Blue," he said.

"Blue. I have that blue scatter rug. You know what we ought to get? A new cover for this day-bed. Maybe a sapphire-blue background." Her eyes shone in her excitement. "I'll get the curtains during the week. I'm glad you like blue."

"I helped, didn't I?" he demanded. "I said the right things."

"We need another lamp or two. Oh, Dale. It's going to be so lovely. I knew we could do it, but I wanted you to be part of it."

"Say, that reminds me." He went to the closet and brought out his suitcase and placed it on the bed. "Remember this?" He reached under some of the clothes and pulled out a picture. "My Cezanne."

"Oh," she said, breathless, "It's lovely."

"Forty bucks," he said. "I won the forty shooting craps. I ran a two-dollar bill up to forty. I should have kept on shooting. We'd have had an original."

"Sure. More likely you'd be walking around without trousers."

"Well," he said, restless. "We're talking around and under and over the point. I wanted to work."

"O. K.," she said, cheerily. "You know you're anxious to get out of it."

"I know." He looked at her dolefully. "That's the hell of it. I hunt around frantically for excuses. Just dangle one in front of me. I get good and angry, but I grab it."

"It's Sunday. Day of rest. Day of relaxation. Day of wife, if you know what I mean. We work hard all week. Sundays we ought to fight, or love, or take a hike up the Palisades. Don't forget, you have to poke around at life before you expect to write it. Mingle with people. Get feminine viewpoints, and bits of tenderness and well-placed

kisses and curtains and things. They have them even in Artichokia. We have years ahead of us. Years. We can't afford to give up moments. We'll do that fifteen years from now, when you look at my fat hips and wonder what you saw in me."

He smiled. "You're in for something. You didn't get much of a bargain. I can stand fat hips. You'll have to put up with tantrums and moods and sharpness and bitterness."

"I'll take a chance."

"You *took* a chance. What you have is signed, sealed, and delivered. Until death do us part, as your Mr. Milsen so cleverly put it."

"We're always going to be happy, aren't we?"

"Blue curtains." He pulled her toward him so that she sat on his knee. He kept his arm around her, patting the soft silk of her robe. She closed her eyes and leaned against him, content. Why were married couples always writing to newspapers, telling of their problems? You sit on your husband's knee and rest your head in the little nook formed by his cheek and shoulder, and your difficulties melt into soft smiles. No lovelorn editor can tell you more than that. We don't need advice from anybody. We know the answers. Look, World, at this blissful example. How to be happy though married! Married seven whole days!

CHAPTER 2

THE One-Act Play was growing, thriving under their devoted care, ready to burst into bloom at an early date. This time it was a dress rehearsal, one of the last before the actual performance. Dale and Connie and Obie watched it, nervous but not displeased, watched it together with the other favored folk in the audience, proud mothers and supercilious husbands and tolerant friends of the performers. It ran smoothly, for the most part, the actors on the stage doing their parts as well as could be expected, and the women scattered throughout the audience coming through with their shrill cries at the proper moments. The young director they had engaged sat on the edge of his seat, far back in the last row, moving his fingers as if he were conducting a symphony, moulding the parts with his hands as if he were leading puppets on the ends of his strings.

Connie's tense hand rested on Dale's arm, pressing it reassuringly. It wasn't bad. When you say that about an amateur performance you're saying a lot. It wasn't as bad as you might have expected. Betty Lou was doing a good job, a bit nervous, perhaps, but putting all she had into it, and the boy Obie had obtained had real talent. Prelude to Nothing. Connie could feel a strange thrill go through her. It was theirs, hers and Dale's. Perhaps it would go places. Other playwrights had started with obscure one-act plays. Why couldn't Dale?

The actors were doing nicely. They remembered their cues, and they tried to get real feeling into their speeches. Sometimes they got in each other's way, and then you could see the young director writhe. But this was a dress rehearsal, and he didn't interfere. Now they were coming down the home stretch. Dale could feel his fingers shaking. Hold it, kids, hold it. Betty Lou and the young boy had most of the lines toward the end, the Auxiliary ladies fading into happy obscurity. They held it, their voices trembling a bit. No wonder. Dale's would, too. They were doing all right. With an audience to inspire them they might really go to town. They reached the big finish without cracking and sustained it, pressing just a little, and came through with a bang at the curtain. He could feel the cold sweat on his forehead. Everybody in the audience applauded, including the ladies of the cast, and it sounded spontaneous, too.

Connie turned to Dale, her cheeks flushed. "It was good," she said, enthusiastically. "It was, wasn't it?"

"It was all right." He turned to Obie. "How did it go?"

"Not bad." Obie nodded thoughtfully. "Not bad at all."

Betty Lou came running from the stage, her make-up still on her face. "How was it?" she demanded.

Dale pinched her cheek. "You were O.K. The others, too. There are a few things I want to go over. You must learn to get more into some of the lines. They aren't all of equal value. Sit on some of them, and give others all you've got. Here—" he rustled the pages of the manuscript, "*I will*, meekly. Here, *You can't do that, you can't*, that comes from away down deep, rising in intensity until you have them on the edge of their seats. There's more. Later. You were all right, though."

She laughed happily and mussed Obie's hair. "See? Praise from the world's greatest writer."

"North America, so far," Obie said, patting his hair back into place. "We haven't scouted Europe. Or Asia."

Connie took Betty Lou's hands in hers. "You were swell. I was really moved. And you looked so pretty, shawl and all."

"Thanks," Betty Lou said, breathless. "Did you hear that, Mr. Smythe?"

"You weren't bad," Obie said. "But Hepburn is still Hepburn. Come on, get dressed, we'll run out for a bite to eat."

She climbed the little flight of steps and went backstage. Dale and Obie joined the group of directors and husbands and friends, discussing trifling changes and improvements here and there. Connie stood near them, nervous and excited. It was Dale's, all Dale's. He *could* do things. This would show them. There were fine lines in the play, lines of gripping beauty. She was so proud of him, and a warm pleasant feeling went through her, knowing that he was hers. Maybe his cockiness and confidence were justified. The greatest playwright in America! They'd see, Harkover and those other stolid producers, they might have to have it thrust at them, but they would finally recognize a new and brilliant light in the theatre, and then they would wonder why they had never known it before. Nobody tells us these things, they would cry, and then Dale could remind them, remind them of the long months of waiting for just a word, for any sign that might let him know that they had seen or read his play. They'd be sorry then. Yes, they would. She was nodding her head, vindictively, and then suddenly she realized what she was doing and stopped and joined the others. But it was nice to be lost in lovely dreams.

Betty Lou was ready now. They said good-bye to all the others, and everybody said encouraging things to everybody else, and then they went out to Obie's car. "We'll go to Dooley's," he said. "Hot roast beef sandwiches that melt in your mouth." He started uptown, putting a tentative arm around Betty Lou's shoulder. She leaned toward him, at peace with the world, and Dale, sitting behind them, put his arm around Connie, and they sat that way, happy, affectionate, content. Everything was going nicely.

They found a table in a quiet corner, and in a few minutes the savory sandwiches were spread before them. Dale looked at them appreciatively. He was in a soft, expansive mood. "Talk about writing," he said, as if his success were now assured, "I didn't start as a playwright. No, oh no. I was big business once, with all the trimmings, a desk to hold my weary feet and a stenographer to soothe my tired hands. Yes, sir. The reward of industry and honesty and an uncle who happened to be chairman of the board."

"Go ahead," Obie said. "Tell them how you were fired."

"I wasn't fired. I just didn't show up one day. I couldn't tolerate their ridiculous notions. For one thing, they expected you to be on time. You know, in Artichokia a man who has absolutely nothing to do must start his loafing on the dot of seven. If he's ten minutes late they hang him. If he's a complete washout they make him a vice-president. Progress, progress, in this lovely land. No wonder other countries imitate wherever possible. But about my job. I was getting along fine. Once I made a suggestion. I told them they needed a brilliant man for some job, a person with an I.Q. of about two hundred. They hired two men with I.Q.'s of a hundred each. You couldn't fool them on arithmetic." He dug eagerly into

his sandwich. "Of course there were compensating features. A lovely blue and pink check at the end of every month, something you don't see when you write plays. It's funny. I've been writing for almost five years now, and I put a thousand times the effort into it that I put into that avuncular position. Not only hard work but thought and emotion and spirit, and I'll bet I haven't earned as much in all those years as I did in six months at the office. There ought to be a moral there, somewhere."

"Sure there is," Obie said. "If you're a bookkeeper you ought to be keeping books."

"It isn't that," Connie said, stoutly. "You chose the wrong relative. You should have had Harkover for an uncle."

Dale shook his head. "We stick to legitimacy in our family. One of those old silly notions. No. It isn't that. It's that nothing succeeds like mediocrity. I can sell a story about Cowboy Waffles and his very fine horse, Corn Syrup. I can't sell a play about real living breathing people. One of these days we'll have to ignore art and turn commercial." He dipped the corner of his bread in the gravy. "But we'll have to be a lot hungrier than this before we do. When we stoop that low we might as well go back to the uncle-factory." He sipped his coffee, put the cup down, and leaned back dreamily. "What is gold, anyhow, except something to bury in the hills of Kentucky? You do what's in you, what your soul is crying for, and to hell with food and shelter and comforts of living. I'm not denying, of course, that a bit of success would be exceedingly welcome."

Obie nodded, smiling. "Not to mention the ten percent the poor slob of an agent would finally get."

"Some day," Dale said. "Some day. I'm gambling. I

walked away from a soft and comfortable job one bright and sunny Saturday afternoon, and I went home and started writing a play, and on Monday I failed to report for work. Some day I ought to call them up and tell them that I'm not coming back. For all I know my salary checks are still accumulating. Ho hum. I finished that first play in three months. It was a cute little thing, with seven thousand soldiers on the stage. Under pressure I cut it down to six thousand. The Guild still wouldn't do it."

"I told you to try four thousand," Obie said. "Even five thousand. You were too damned stubborn."

"It was art," Dale said, haughtily, "not big business. If stages aren't large enough for an Edwin production let them build bigger stages. What's five thousand soldiers? Of course, each one had a girl, and there were three or four hundred principals. I suppose most first plays are like that. Some day I'll write a play with one character and a phonograph. The setting can be a chair."

"Look," Obie said. "Do you want another sandwich?"

Dale shook his head. "No. Good sandwiches, though."

"All right. Let's stop this review of the life and times of Dale Edwin, playwright and financier. I thought we could get down to business. Otherwise I'm going home. I'm not a playwright. I need sleep."

"O. K.," Dale said. "Another cup of coffee." He motioned to the waiter. "There isn't much. I want your little friend here to get off on the right foot. She has some pretty heavy lines. The juvenile was all right. Nice boy. He puts his heart into it, the way kids do. I like that. Now, you." He turned to Betty Lou. "Montgomery School of Dramaturgy. How many lessons did you have?"

"Let her alone," Obie said, sharply.

"I want to improve," she said, earnestly. "Tell me."

"Your carcass," Dale said. "Lovely to look at, and all that, but you're supposed to move around. You come in and stand in one place. We're paying rent for the whole stage."

"What did I do?" she asked, anxiously.

"You park your rear end against the El pillar, like Fanny Brice singing 'My Man.' Walk. Relax. Turn. Practise it at home. You've been saying the lines before a mirror. That's why you don't stir. And another thing. Don't give the lines all equal value: You're not reciting nursery rhymes. Put some punch into the good lines, and drop your voice on the weak ones."

"She'll be whispering all through the play," Obie said.

"I'll get it," she said. "I will. I'm glad to get constructive criticism. They didn't teach us everything in Montgomery."

"No," Dale said. "Not everything." He thumbed the manuscript. "Look. I'll mark the lines. A red cross in the margin means a bit of emphasis. Double line means give it everything. Circles mean move the body. Get it?"

She leaned over eagerly and watched him work, nodding, her eyes alight. "I can do it. I can. I know I can. I'll practise all day tomorrow."

"You're all right, Betty Lou," Connie said. "You'll make a good trouper."

Dale moved through the pages assiduously, lifting his coffee cup with his left hand as he made the notes with his right. *His* play. Dale Edwin's. His early contempt for it was gone. It was good. Anybody could see that. It would be good, even the way these beginners did it. These lines could ring out in the darkness, played by stars or by robots. He'd given up everything for writing, and now he was to have his reward. Now for the first time his

words, his own lines, were to be hurled back at him from across the footlights. And the sensation was greater than he would have imagined. What did it matter that they were amateurs, self-conscious, nervous, stiff, lifeless? Ladies' groups were still doing Shakespeare, and Juliet lived no matter what stage-struck small-town kid voiced her deathless lines. And Edwin would live, Dale Edwin, not through Betty Lou and the Ladies' Auxiliary, but because the lines were there, the feelings, the emotions, fine solid lines woven into a tight little play that could rise above its performance.

People would know. He could feel his heart pounding. *Rise, rise, the night is behind us, we can look forward to a new sunrise.* She could do it, that little you-all had some fire inside of her and could let it out through the words he was putting into her mouth. That last bit, with the audience shouting, and Betty Lou in her shawl stalking heroically above it all, that would have them by the ears. It was tense, gripping, even as he read it there, his red pencil in one hand and his cup of coffee in the other. He could feel it pounding through him, just as it would pound through the audience. It was for them, of them. And others would hear about it, about that tense one-act play, *Prelude to Nothing*, by Dale Edwin. By whom? By Dale Edwin, stupid, the newest and greatest of modern playwrights.

Something was going to happen. You could tell that. It was in the air, charging the very restaurant with its electricity, with hope, with excitement, with expectation. Something was going to happen. Something big. "Now, here," he said, and then he stopped, realizing that his voice was trembling. He sipped the last of his coffee. "Now, here," he repeated, controlling himself with an effort, "you

start gently, *There is no end, not for us, ever*, and work up gradually to *We shall go on, always forward, forward*, then give it all you've got, here, where new hope is dawning, *Another night, another day!*"

CHAPTER 3

THE girls at the office usually wore their nicer clothes on Saturday, so it wasn't difficult for Connie to convince herself that that was the reason for her gray tailored suit with the bits of silver fox at the collar. Saturday. It was only another Saturday, two weeks after that tremendously important day, and the one thought that kept coming back to her was that she hadn't told Hank. She would have to let him know sooner or later, and the nice way to do it, the only way, was to pay him a visit. Of course, you wonder if it's precisely proper for a new and respectable married woman, but then you decide that dropping in at a man's store isn't really a social visit. Any well-oiled conscience will tell you that if you prod it hard enough.

She owed that much to Hank. They'd come close, so close, and then suddenly a borrowed car and moonlight and five-dollar bills had twisted into her life, and now she was Mrs. Dale Edwin. Impulse. But that was the way she'd always done things, and this time, knowing that it might have been Hank, she felt that she had to tell him. It wouldn't be easy.

She looked nice. As if that would soften the blow. Wait, young lady, take it easy, now. What blow? Looking nice is all right, but don't get the idea that Brady is slumped under a counter, pining away at the loss of his loved one. For all we know he is married and has six chil-

dren somewhere in Pittsburgh. Don't let your imagination run away with you. You've seen the man a few times, and he was sweet to you. Did that have any special meaning? You know he's the sort that would help an old lady across the street, and he would lift his hat and say whatever it is a boy-scout says after his daily good deed. But he wouldn't kiss her, wouldn't kiss the old lady, that is. And he *had* kissed Connie, and you could be sure that he wasn't the sort of fellow who went around kissing people.

Well. You talk things over with yourself, arriving at no conclusion, and it remains as difficult as ever to plunge into his place, so you stand before the door and glance inside and see him chatting with a customer, and you wonder if you shouldn't postpone your visit for a week or so. Then you decide to cross the street, to survey things from the other side, as if the ethics are different over there. The bold gilt letters on the window stare right back at you. HANK BRADY, SPORTS. There's no reason for your heart to beat more quickly at that. You have no interest in him, none whatsoever. It's only his name, and you know it would be damned peculiar if it weren't somewhere around the store. Hank Brady. It gave you a feeling of strength, of solidity, of something you could lean against and know it was there, today and tomorrow and days and weeks after that. But all that didn't concern her. She was paying a simple social call, doing the nice thing, just as Hank would have done if the conditions had been reversed.

She could see the customer leave the store, and she crossed the street timidly. She stood before the door for an instant, then gathered courage and opened it and walked in. Hank was alone. He took an instinctive step toward her, then stopped. She came closer to him and put out her hand.

"Connie," he said, holding her hand. "I'm glad you came. I was wondering whether to call you."

"Did you know?"

He nodded. "Martha called me. It was nice of her, considering that I scarcely know her."

"Well," she said, hesitantly. "I'm glad she did. Sort of breaks the ice. Now I don't know if I came in to apologize or to buy a tennis racquet. I was arguing with my conscience."

He let her hand drop. "You play tennis?"

"I never tried," she said, slowly. "I never expect to. That ought to give you a clue. If you were running a post office I'd probably need some stamps." She brushed an imaginary speck from the lapel of her jacket. "I rehearsed the part about the tennis racquet. I said it before the mirror."

"It stuck out all over," he said. "The rehearsal."

"I ad libbed about the post office."

"We never fooled each other, did we, Connie?"

She shook her head. "We haven't had much chance. But that isn't the reason." She looked around. "Do people walk in and out of here and wonder what a lady is doing? I mean, am I going to be embarrassed if I stay?"

"Customers? Sometimes a week goes by without one. There was one here just before you. Maybe that's the quota for the day. You won't be bothered."

"Then we've reached the point where you either throw the lady out or ask her to sit down."

He pulled a chair over and she dropped into it. "How did you know where I was?" he asked, trying to make conversation.

"Phone book. There aren't so many Bradys. Only a column and a half."

"We've been loafing," he said, uncomfortably. "There should be more than that."

"There are pages of Cohens and Kellys."

What difference does it make, he thought. Are we talking about unimportant pages of unimportant people, or are we going to get down to the ones that matter to us? "Can I wish you luck, Connie? From way down. That's the way I feel. I want you to be happy. It's important. Real bubbling happiness, the kind that sparkles." He touched her forehead with his finger-tips. "Stop frowning. You don't frown when you're happy. You ought to know that."

"I have to learn. Lots of things." She smiled up at him. "Is that better?"

"Fair. We'll go into that some other time. Tell me. How are you getting along?"

"All right. Really very nicely. We aren't harassed by feelings that are too deep to tolerate. We're the sensible sort. We accept things. I suppose that's the basis for a happy married life."

"Who hasn't deep feelings?" he asked. "You? That's a riot. You're a bundle of firecrackers. Don't you think it's about time you knew yourself?"

She lifted an admonishing finger. "Social call, Brady. No analysis. You go into that and I'll start buying things." She pointed to an exercising machine on the wall. "How much is that?"

"We don't sell them. We tell people to drink orange juice instead." He straightened a box of sport shoes on the counter, looking at it critically, as if it were very important.

"Well?" she said, watching him.

"Well?" His tone was harder than he intended. "Tell me about it. Sudden, wasn't it?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. We've been engaged for almost a year. That's supposed to mean something." She let her left hand rest on the counter, then moved it when she saw his glance fall on her ring. "We got it at Woolworth's," she explained. "It's genuine something-or-other. Iron, probably." She examined it carefully. "Guaranteed not to tarnish. Not for months."

He swallowed and cleared his throat. "Months. That's a long time." He looked at her but she turned her head away. "Connie," he said. "Are you—are you happy?" He wondered at the unnatural sound of his voice.

"I'm not a happy person," she said. "Not by nature. I'm doing nicely, in a sort of daze. I must have expected something revolutionary. Things are more or less the same, except that there's a man around the house. A man in his undershirt. That's a change, isn't it? I really should be more impressed."

He managed to find some trifles on the shelves that needed his attention. "I'm not up on current trends," he said, not looking at her. "Isn't there supposed to be a terrific rush of emotion, of love everlasting, of tenderness? Or is it just an arrangement where you can have breakfast together without fear of the cops busting in?"

"We get along all right," she said, jumping to the defensive. "There's been so much excitement. We haven't had time to look each other over carefully. They've been rehearsing that one-act play. I never saw such turmoil. They expect big things of it. I don't know why or how, but Dale feels it will be the turning-point in his life. In *our* lives."

"That's fine," he said, without enthusiasm. "I hope it's a great success."

"Of course it's only an amateur group." She leaned forward eagerly. "But you can't tell. Things may happen.

Not in a financial way. There's no money in it. Opportunity, I suppose. Anyhow, that's partly the answer to your question. We've been too busy. We haven't bubbled over, but we're definitely polite to each other. A nice average marriage, as far as I can tell." She turned to him suddenly, ashamed of her confession. "How well do I know you, anyhow?" she demanded. "What are you trying to do, pick us apart? I didn't walk out on you. It was Dale I was engaged to. You were standing by, wishing us happiness. I don't have to answer to you."

"We poured our hearts out to each other. Connie. Don't you remember? I didn't take your engagement too seriously. I thought we were going places. Well. It's my own fault. I sit back and let Nature take its course." He held his hands before him, staring at them. Hands strong enough to tear his adversary in half, and he merely held them, poised as in prayer, hoping, wishing, for the things he desired. Not using them, hands powerful enough to get what they wanted. To get Connie, whom he wanted more than anything in life. Strong hands, and now he could use them to tear pages from the calendar, watching the days pass. "We *could* talk to each other, couldn't we, Connie?" he said, softly. "Let's hang on to that. We don't have to give up everything."

"Sure. But it's silly. We don't have to make any pacts. We were friends before and we're going to be, now."

"All right," he said, calmer. "Tell me about it. How did it all happen?"

"The marriage? Oh, we hadn't set any date. We knew it would be something sudden, and it was. We drove up to Greenwich in Obie's car. Nice town. They marry

you just like that." She looked around, uncomfortable. "Can I take my hat off? It's warm here."

"Sure," he said. "It isn't so warm."

She put the hat on the counter. "*I'm* warm."

He leaned toward her eagerly. "There are things I want to ask you. Deep personal things that I'll never be able to say. Tell me, will you, Connie? I mean tell me without my asking."

She shook her head. "We're not that close, Hank. We're strangers. You can't take a girl to the movies and expect an option on her future." She moved her hands through the air as if to brush it clear of his questions. "Nothing about Dale. Please. Nothing personal, I mean. Or about us. That's deep inside of me. I'll tell you only this. I don't feel as if I've changed. *I'm not a new person. Do you know what I mean? I put new curtains on the living-room window and so far I'd call that the big moment of our married life. The rest just flows naturally, as if it were ordained that way." She stopped abruptly, frowning. "Well. I suppose I've told you what I wanted not to say. I don't want you to draw things out of me. Why do you try to make me feel that I've done something I'm going to regret? It isn't so." Her tone was more intense. "It isn't. I'm not flitting from flower to flower, trying to sip bits of happiness here and there. I'm a staid sober serious industrious house-wife who can broil lamb-chops with the best of them. I might go crazy once in a while, if the mood hits me, but after it's over I can slink back to my stove and dishes. Mrs. Dale Edwin, now preparing the evening snack. That's the way it's going to be, from now on."

"I know," he said. "I'm not trying to lead you astray. I asked about your happiness because it's important to

me. I'm not prying into your deeper emotions. We can stick to the weather if you'd rather. We got along nicely with the weather."

"I don't know much about ethics." She put her hat on and patted her hair into place. "I've always been governed by impulse. Is it all right for me to see you, do you think? I mean without buying things? Otherwise I'll have the house all cluttered up with skis and rowing machines."

"I want you to come. Drop in casually, as if you were really getting a tennis racquet. Maybe we can have lunch together. Will you? Sandwiches, in the rear." He pointed vaguely. "Sandwiches and coffee. I'll get a geranium. What do you say?"

"Sure." She got up and stepped slowly to the door. "I'd love it."

He stayed close to her, reluctant to let her go. "I'd like to put my arms around you," he said. "To press you close to me. I had to tell you that, because now I never will."

"No. Never. It's going to be that way. Anything else and I'll never visit you again. And I do want to." She put out her hand, and he held it for a long moment. "So long, Hank," she said. "If I see any customers I'll shoo them in. And don't let them get away."

"I won't," he said, grimly. "Not this time. And thanks, Connie."

She turned and smiled and started up the street. He stood at the door and watched her, but she didn't look back. Connie married! The same sweet soft lovely Connie, and now her body belonged to somebody else, somebody who caressed it or ignored it, now that he had possession. He went back into the store and started to move her chair,

then changed his mind and left it where it was. Sticky sentimentality. The sort of thing you ridicule when you see it in the movies. When you reach that stage they ought to shoot you. Annoyed at himself, he picked up the chair and swung it back to its former position as if it had no weight. That was better.

Six-feet-one going whimsical! No, not Brady. He could pull himself together. He stood there, staring at the counter where her hand had rested, still wondering about that empty feeling, as if he had lost something, as if something had gone out of his life.

CHAPTER 4

"THAT baby," Baxter said. "Hanging around as if he owned the place."

"Petie?" Martha could feel the catch of her breath. "Was he here today?"

"Two hours, no less. His mother dumps him in as if he were a bundle of laundry. You stay in a while, Mister Cunningham? Sure. You mind the bambino? Sure." He shook his head in pretended annoyance, then softened. "He's a nice baby, though. We had fun together. One thing about the Italians. They don't spoil their kids."

Martha pecked at her food. "Wish I'd been here." She could feel the longing seep through her body. "I love to play with him. I washed his face the other day. He's a beautiful child, under the dirt. Warm soft eyes, like the Madonna."

"He's a good kid." He looked at her anxiously. "What's the matter? Don't you like the hamburgers?"

"I'm not so hungry. I'm—I'm weary. I don't know." She stretched. "God, how the years slip by."

"Don't they?" He trudged into the kitchen with the soiled plates. "Coffee?" he called.

"Have we milk?"

He poured out two glasses, and brought them in with some plain store cake. "Cheap meal," he said, looking to her for approval.

"Did he talk? He's learning so nicely. You know, he won't be a year old for another month or so."

"He made a few sounds. I suppose you could call it talking."

"They accept him so casually," she said, as if it hurt. "His parents. The way they do sunny days. *I'd* be like a tiger. Nobody would ever hurt *my* baby."

Baxter nodded wisely. "Sure. That's the way to spoil them. Emotional mother, spoiled child. Ask anybody."

"Fine lot we know about it." She got up slowly. "Let me wash," she said, without enthusiasm. "I need some sort of outlet. I'm in a buy-a-hat-or-scream mood."

"I'll clean up. You go inside and rest."

She stayed where she was. It would take too much energy to move, or even to argue with him. This was one of her bad days. But they were all bad, most of them, anyhow. And they went on and on, for years, and nothing ever seemed to open up, so that they could see hope ahead. If you haven't hope, what have you? She wanted more out of life than just living. That baby—"I'll help," she said. She found a towel and waited for him to get a few dishes into the draining pan. "One year is the same as the next," she said, as if she were talking to herself. "Soon it'll be fall, and then winter, and then things start popping out of the ground, new life, new hope, and we're a year older. What are we waiting for? Death to sneak up on us?"

He held a platter up to the light, critically. "Had a hard day, dear?"

"Sure. I got up in the morning and I'll go to bed at night. All that's in between doesn't matter. I love hard busy days, days that keep me from thinking. Next month I'll have a birthday. I'll be thirty-nine."

"Thirty-nine," he repeated. "You're getting on."

"Thirty-nine," she said, her voice lifting. "Sure I'm getting on. What could I pass for? Thirty-five? Sixty?"

He looked at her as if he had never thought of that before. "About thirty-five, I'd say. Yes. Yes, about thirty-five."

She bowed in mock appreciation. "Always chivalrous. Forty, forty-five, say it, I don't care. Each year I try some new little trick to look younger. A new way of combing my hair, a little ribbon, a cute collar. I pull out a gray hair. What difference does it make? You add one to thirty-eight and it's still thirty-nine. The triumph of arithmetic over hope. And you feel that extra year. It spreads over your body and weighs you down."

"I'll be forty-five in December," he said, moving the dishes in the tray. "Forty-five. That's creeping up on fifty, isn't it?"

"I can tell that I'm getting old. It's the things that happened long ago that seem clearest to me. Nine years, ten years, it must have been in nineteen twenty-nine. You came home beaming and slapped me across the back-side with your newspaper. Two thousand dollars! Two thousand dollars!"

"It was clear profit," he said, his eyes lighting. "I sold my hundred shares of Hupp. Twenty points."

"You said, mink coat or baby? We were rich, both of us working, both of us young. But it wasn't so long ago, and still we were young then."

"You chose the mink coat."

"Yes," she said, pressing her white fingers. "Seventeen hundred dollars, and three hundred for accessories. I think you got a necktie out of it."

"It must have been in twenty-nine. It was six or seven months before the crash."

"I chose the mink coat. It was lovely." She ran her fingers along her dress, caressing the imaginary smoothness. That was the year people were buying furs. Things of that nature go in waves. Buy mink, or go to Florida. You must join the crowd and do the smart thing. One season it was contract bridge, and then a year or so passed and they were going to Mexico. Then for a while it was courses in abnormal psychology at the New School, and later it was causes and parties for Spain. And now they were having children. They finally got around to that. The ultra ultra, in thought, in movement, in leadership, now they'd discovered babies, and if you didn't know the Child Study theories backwards and forwards you might just as well step out of the picture. Why didn't they do it sooner, back in twenty-nine, when she could have followed the others? Fools, discovering the obvious years too late, learning what smiling ignorant Mrs. Crossi knew by instinct, that there is no real happiness in life unless it is in bringing forth new life. Now it's the thing to do, isn't it? But it was fur coats then, fur coats or Florida, everybody flush with more money than they'd ever had before, and she had chosen the mink. "I was never so happy," she said. "Nineteen twenty-nine. God. I was young then, twenty-seven or eight. I didn't have to fix those cute bows to fool anybody. People thought I was about twenty. I remember that when I went to get a job. They didn't want to interview me. Thought I was too young. And it's only ten years. What's happened to the time? Where's it all gone?"

"Ten years," he said. "It doesn't seem possible. I was looking for Hupp the other day. It's off the board. Guess

it went right on down to nothing. Like our other stocks. Like us."

"Imagine," she said, dully. "Another month, and another year, and I'll be forty. It frightens me."

"Life begins at forty," he quoted. "It's funny. I was just reaching forty when that book became popular. I waited for my birthday as if it were an omen. Forty. Forty. Things would change at forty, life would begin." The dishes were getting ahead of her, and he waited for her to get going. There was a long pause, as if she hadn't noticed that he had stopped talking. "Nothing happened," he said, awkwardly.

"I know." She watched him as he walked toward the cupboard, putting away the few dishes she had dried. Softly. Softly. Like a eunuch. You couldn't hear his steps on the worn linoleum. A man should storm through his house, pounding things, smashing them, owning them.

"That was when I got a job in a cafeteria," he said. "I'd tried everything else." He smiled ruefully. "Life beginning. Remember? It was the first time I went without my glasses. You know, that wasn't a bad idea. I got a couple of jobs that way."

"Yes," she said, "I remember." He'd come home so excited. It had worked. He'd left his glasses home, and somehow he didn't look so weak, so helpless, without them. P.S., he said, when he came home that night, I got the job. And her heart sank, as if it were the end of things. Bus-boy in a cafeteria, at twelve dollars a week, with lunches. He'd left his glasses home, and his LL.D., and his pride and his background. Twelve dollars. That would be six hundred dollars a year, but of course it wouldn't last a year, but if it did and your soul could bear it, it would still take more than three years to earn

the amount she'd spent in one reckless Saturday. The twenty points he'd made in Hupp, and the salesman kept calling her Modom, as if she had a title of some sort, and she stroked the shiny fur and her heart pumped so that she was afraid it would show, right through the mink. Lovely, Modom, and really quite reasonable, Modom, and furs will surely be higher next year, Modom. And she looked at Baxter, and he nodded Yes, eagerly, for next week he could buy some more Hupp and make twenty points all over again, just as everybody else was doing. How it had all come back to her, bus-boy in a cafeteria, and he so jubilant, and she sitting there crying, and through all their troubles, she seemed to remember that it was the first time she'd cried. But that was then, and she'd learned how since.

"Baxter Cunningham, Third, forgetting his Harvard accent," he said, bitterly. "Rah rah rah, rah rah rah, Harvard. And do you need any bus-boys today?" For a moment his voice rose, but then it slipped and he was soft again, soft and quiet. "The skin on my hands cracked," he said. "I couldn't get used to that. And then those infections. I suppose I was never cut out for manual labor."

She smiled, a little smile, as she looked at his slight frame. "No, darling. Not you. You're not the type."

"I tried, didn't I, Martha? What can a fellow do? I've tried everything."

"I know. You've had the most damnable luck. Sometimes I think you're right about your jinx. If there's such a thing as a permanent one you must have found it. I'm not complaining." She moved a despondent hand across her forehead. "Honestly, Bax. I just get tired. And scared. I'm afraid of the years. You know what I mean."

"Life begins at forty," he repeated, wisely.

Life begins, or else it ends. That part of life that can bring new life. But there's a span in a woman's life, so many allotted years in which to show that you are a woman, not merely a body. Let them slide, and suddenly you run up against a sign which says Dead End. And after that you go no farther. They matured early in her family. Just a kid, playing with dolls and toys, and suddenly discovering that you are a woman. You should have told her, Aunt Jo said. Scaring a child like that. And her mother, distraught, saying, I was going to, soon. Who would expect it, why, she's not even eleven. Come, pet, don't be frightened . . . Early. Too early. Then those years were wasted, and now they were going to be lopped off the other end, when they were important. That's what people said, even doctors. How many years do you think your body can remain fertile? An early start means an early end, maybe forty, or forty-one. But good God, I'll be there soon, another year and I'll be forty, two more years and hope will be gone. That isn't fair. I haven't had a chance, these last ten years. They rushed by so fast that I didn't have time to examine them, to find the perfect opportunity. There must have been times, somewhere along the route. Six years ago, perhaps, Baxter had some sort of job then, with a paint company, and it looked as though it might be steady. We saved a bit of money, yes, we were going to start in June, so that we'd have a spring baby, they do say that babies born in March or April are the strongest, and then of course Baxter lost the job before we quite got around to it. But it was always that way.

She walked back and forth across the little room. "We could have had a boy of ten. Or a girl."

He stepped close to her, and put his hand on her arm. "Don't, Martha. You're the strong one. I've dropped a long ways." His narrow shoulders slumped. "Don't you. One of us has to keep going."

"I can't," she said, pounding her thighs with clenched fists. "I can't. How long can I go on? I'm strong. I'm the fighter. Sure I am." She sat down weakly and let the towel drop to her lap. "I'm a woman. My body's crying for something. I want a baby. I can't be plainer than that. I want it. I want it. Every day the feeling grows inside of me, and then it's spring and another year has gone. We'll wait. Sure. You'll wait, and I'll wait. And Nature won't. You have your chances, but good Lord, they don't last forever. Something happens to a body. Maybe I've started. I don't know. Thirty-nine. Forty. I'm scared." She reached for a dish and started to dry it, slowly, methodically, then held it before her as if it were the source of all her troubles. "This plate is cracked," she said, unhappily. "You must have bumped it." She started to cry, softly, wiping her eyes with the rough towel. "I'll have to get some new dishes."

"Martha," he said, standing close to her, wanting to touch her. "Martha."

She let her hand rest on his. "Not you, Bax. I'm not blaming you. You've done all a man could. I never saw so many tough breaks in a lifetime. Maybe we were lucky about the coat." She tried to smile. "We never could have hocked the baby."

You see yourself, your hopes, your dreams, in your children. Once she was going to amount to something. Why not? She was somebody at school, she with her poetry and her compositions that they let her read before the class. Martha Rawlings, and sometimes the fine

brittle poems that were printed in the school papers were reprinted elsewhere, and everybody predicted a brilliant future for her. But she hadn't gone on. Things were too easy for a while, and then they were too hard. And now she was nothing. She'd let an eager mind atrophy, and it would never be stirred to life again.

If you're a failure you go to art school and paint pictures of carrots, or else you have a child. You must have an outlet. You owe that to your ego. You can show your bored friends the chiaroscuro that your teacher admired, or you can tell them what Junior said when he saw Daddy under the shower. You must have something, or your life hangs about you like the shroud on a corpse. You've faded, withered, your flesh and bones and pride and hopes have crumbled, and nothing is left, nothing.

She swallowed hard, pulling herself together with an effort. Martha Cunningham crying because a dish (or was it her life?) was cracked. No, she'd faced it before and she could do it again. And again. She put the last of the dishes down and sighed wearily.

Baxter wet his lips. "Don't, Martha," he said. "You're only hurting yourself."

"I have to, once in a while. I wasn't cut out to be the strong one. I can break down with the best of them. They wouldn't believe that in the office. Martha Cunningham crying! Why, not that old battle-axe, she wouldn't cry if you cut off her ears. Crying. Crying for what? Because she wants a baby. Ha. A baby. And could you imagine her with a baby? Her! It's funny. It's funny, I tell you. Or isn't it?"

"Don't, Martha," he begged. "Not twice in one evening."

"That's right. I never used to cry at all. It helps.

Better than bows or collars for restoring youth. Did you know that? Tears. The alchemist's elixir to soften the roughened cheek."

He looked at her, puzzled. "You have a strange way of saying things," he said. "Poetic, sort of."

Not twice in one day. You have to spread these things out, over a lifetime. You can't afford the luxury of two good cries, one right after the other. She pressed her lips and straightened her shoulders, strong again, and flipped her towel on to the rack with a saucy toss. "So," she said, with mock severity, "I bare my soul, pour out my very heart, and you stand there and tell me it's iambic pentameter."

CHAPTER 5

IF THERE was one thing Obie could recognize at a quick glance, it was a flop. It's different with a hit. You're never quite sure of that, but when a play starts coming apart at the seams and lands on the stage with a dull thud you don't have to be an expert to know that it's bad. *Prelude to Nothing* opened and closed the same night, leaving behind nothing but an unpleasant odor. No use kidding yourself about it. A lovely mild evening, and everybody bright and happy, the rented hall nicely decorated, the seats full of eager friends and relatives, the actors anxious and alert, and then suddenly things start going wrong. Wooden creatures move clumsily across a crowded stage, uttering lines that could not possibly have been in the script. Scenes creak and wheeze to ridiculous endings, and the big finish is so ludicrous that you wait impatiently for the final curtain, as you would wait for death as a release from misery. You slip from your chair during the polite applause when it is over, and run, not walk, to the nearest exit. You can't face the others after this, you, the hard-boiled agent who has seen all that is bad in drama, so you sneak out before any of them can commiserate with you.

He shouldn't have left Betty Lou. He sat at his desk next morning, nervous, apprehensive, upset, knowing that he should have stayed to talk with her, to console her.

She was a sweet young thing, trying her best. It wasn't her fault that the play hadn't gone over. Nobody could have breathed life into it. It was a turkey, and the only thing that surprised him was that he hadn't been aware of it sooner. But you can't tell until you see an actual performance. Even a dress rehearsal doesn't count. He sat there, shaking his head sadly. Everything had to happen at once. First, the play, and then Betty Lou probably angry at him, and then that message about the Trenton call when he got home. He would have to straighten himself out somehow.

"Operator," he said, impatiently, "can't you get that Trenton number? Well, keep trying. It's urgent." Maybe he should have gotten drunk. You can get rid of a lot of troubles by getting drunk. Of course, it doesn't last long. But then you can get drunk again. He should have waited for Betty Lou. He should have gone down to Trenton last night. His mother must be pretty sick or they wouldn't have called so late. Funny they couldn't get the number.

The door opened and he looked up expectantly. It was Betty Lou. She peered in, timid, waiting for a word from him. He started to his feet, then sat back and fumbled with his mail. "Come in," he said, snappily. "I don't bite. Sit down." He picked up a few letters and slammed them down without opening them. "Ads," he said. "Life insurance. Do you want any life insurance? It might not be a bad idea."

"Obie," she said, coming toward him. "Why didn't you wait?"

He looked away, uncomfortable. "I couldn't face you. I didn't want to talk to anybody. Especially you and Dale. I dragged both of you into this. God. What a play."

She leaned against his desk, twisting her fingers. "Was it really so bad?"

He glared at her, then nodded sadly. "It was terrible. I don't know why. It didn't seem so awful on paper. Even in rehearsal. That's the difference between amateurs and actors. Put an audience in front of an actor and he'll give it everything he's got. Your bunch probably went fine at home, with three empty chairs and the superintendent's wife. Yesterday . . . oh, well."

"I'm sorry," she said, her shoulders slumping.

"You were all right. Don't mind me. I'm all on edge." He stared at the phone, and it rang, as if complying with his wish. "Hello . . . Don't answer? Keep trying, will you?" He dropped it back on the stand. "My mother," he explained. "I don't know why they don't answer. Maybe they're taking her to the hospital."

"Your mother," she said, her eyes wide. "You never told me about your mother."

"No. No. You can't tell the hounds around here you have a mother. They think it's indecent. Well, I have. She hasn't been so well."

"I'm sorry," she said, sincerely. "I hope it's all right. Really, I do."

His face softened. "You're O.K., Betty Lou. You can forget your own troubles for a moment." He let his hand rest on hers. "Sit down, for God's sakes. You'll have me jittery in a minute."

She sat on the edge of the chair, looking at him as if praying for forgiveness. Obie opened a few of his letters, restless, stopping every few seconds to turn his aggrieved glance to the telephone. Betty Lou watched him, biting her lips, accepting full blame for the one-act play, for the mother's illness, for the dilatory telephone, for all the

troubles of the world. After a while the door swung open again. This time it was Dale.

"Under the bludgeonings of fate, my head is bloody but unbowed," he recited, slamming the door after him. "Ha, the star." He bowed low. "Greetings, Duse. How to act, in ten easy lessons. Next time we wait till you finish the other nine" He turned to Obie, belligerently. "Who was that fifth guy?"

Obie motioned him to a chair. "What fifth guy?"

"That shouted Author! Author! I hired only four."

"I had three uncles," Obie said, "with specific instructions. One of them got mixed up and hollered, Lousy!"

"He wasn't so mixed up," Dale said.

Betty Lou turned to him, appealing. "Was it really so bad?"

"It wasn't bad. Not on paper. God, what you dames did to a good play."

"I was all right," she insisted. "I didn't forget a single line."

Dale smiled sarcastically. "A perfect performance. Bernhardt fumbled bits here and there. Barrymore rewrote his parts as he went along. But good old Montgomery, Alabama, stood on a dime and watched the hits go by."

"I wasn't standing on any dime. I don't know what you mean."

"You didn't move. Physically, or emotionally, or any old way." He sat down, as if all the strength had gone out of his body. "I don't know. You weren't so bad at rehearsal."

"She was all right," Obie said, stubbornly. "You dash down some smelly notes while you're playing out a bridge hand and then you expect the audience to stand up and cheer."

"I didn't expect," Dale said, despondently. "I hoped. There's no law against hoping, is there?"

Betty Lou looked from one to the other, not knowing what to say. She bit her nails nervously, then noticed what she was doing and tried to keep her hands in her lap. Dale picked up some manuscripts from Obie's desk and thumbed through them, his mind on other things. Obie turned to his mail again, opening two or three of the letters, scanning them, then throwing them into the wastebasket. He picked up the phone, started to spin the dial, changed his mind and put it down. They were all uneasy, tense, impatient.

"In Artichokia," Dale said, slowly, "if a man writes a good play they throw him into jail."

Betty Lou lifted her wide eyes. "Why?"

"He is an enemy to public policy. They demand mediocrity."

"Where is that?" she asked, innocently.

"Here," Dale said, louder. "Here. Right under your nose. Write something good and they castigate you. Give 'em crap, truckloads of it, and you can make your fortune."

"You ought to be rich by now," Obie said, testily.

Dale looked at him for an instant, bitter, then shook his head sadly. "When I was a little boy," he said, in a fatherly way, "my old man took me on his knee and gave me some good advice. Advice I've never forgotten. Never argue with dopes, he said. Never argue with dopes."

"A dope," Obie explained, "is one who disagrees with you."

Dale smiled ruefully. "It was his left knee," he said, facing Betty Lou and ignoring Obie completely. "He had water on the left knee, and a blonde named Bertha on

the right. And he looked me in the eye and he said, Never argue with dopes."

"I don't understand," she said, helplessly.

"Go read yourself some palms," he said. "You and your chiromancy. Up like a rocket and down like a stick. Get a turban and a tent and don't bathe for a few weeks and I'll set you up in business." He thrust his palm under her nose. "Does it say anything about a rapid descent without a rise?"

She took his hand eagerly. "It's there," she said, excited. "Plain as day. Up and then down."

"When?"

"It doesn't say when. Soon, I think."

"Of course," Obie said, with exaggerated sweetness, "we don't believe in that stuff."

"No," Dale snapped. "No, damn it, we don't. But we try to believe in something. They've been handing us this better-mouse-trap stuff for a good while. It isn't so."

"Nothing's happened," Betty Lou insisted. "You didn't expect anything out of this play, did you?"

Obie put his hand on hers again. "Sometimes things start moving. We were hoping, that's all. Hoping. Somebody could have bombed the place, and we'd have front-page publicity. Something like that. God. Not a line. Not a word, anywhere. If we'd tried to keep it a dark secret we couldn't have done better."

"Where were your uncles?" Dale asked. "The ones that make bombs?"

Obie shrugged. "Something could have happened. Not a damned thing. Maybe we were depending on miracles. What the hell did you have, anyhow? Three good cracks and a title. I didn't even hear the lines that were supposed to be funny. Twice trucks went rumbling by and once

that old lady swallowed her false teeth." He glared at the telephone, then turned suddenly to Dale. "Why didn't you put more into it? You could have worked harder. What sense was there in trying to finish it in a couple of hours?"

"You don't multiply skill by hours, dearest," Dale said, coldly. "You aren't twice as brilliant in four hours as you are in two. You feel you have something inside of you and you put it down on paper. Then a lot of clowns mouth it back at you and you wonder if it's the same language you wrote. Suppose I had given it more time? Would sweetie-pie have moved that cute little fanny?"

"I *did* move," Betty Lou insisted, tears coming to her eyes. "I *didn't* stand in one place. I couldn't go around bumping into the others."

Obie patted her shoulder. "Don't mind him. All the universe is going to be responsible for his shortcomings. That's the easy escape of genius. You can always toss the blame somewhere else."

Dale spotted the manuscript on the corner of the desk. He reached over and picked it up. "Read it," he said, pounding it with his hand. "Read it. It isn't as bad as all that. Listen, you flat-footed bastard, you're going to sell this play for me. It *has* something. Something the public wants."

"They sure didn't find out about it yesterday."

Bettie Lou bit her lips and turned to Obie. "I wouldn't let him call you that."

"That? From him that's a compliment."

Dale drew himself up and glared at her. "Are you still here, Garbo?"

"I was here ahead of you," she said, stoutly. "Nobody asked you to butt in. You're—you're a sorehead. I did

my part all right. Ask anybody. They were all congratulating me after the curtain."

"Why not? You escaped with your life." He shook his head sadly. "Prelude to Nothing. A One-Act Play. By Dale Edwin. Prelude to Nothing. Ah, sweet words, too too prophetic."

"It's a good title," she said, eagerly.

"It is," he admitted, appeased. He chewed for a moment. "If you said it was a good play I'd almost forgive you."

"It is good. I mean it. It is. I think it's marvelous. To put words down like that, words that flow. I think you've done something wonderful. That's why I can't understand all the gloom. I thought everything went fine, with all the lights and the women shouting from the audience, and the way everybody applauded and cheered when it was over. What did you expect, anyhow?"

"I broke my neck getting a few people there," Obie explained. "Not big shots. Assistants, secretaries, brothers-in-law of producers. I expected something big. Something tremendous. We were going to have the theatrical world by the tail, have them bidding frantically for the Edwin plays. We built it up, built it up, and boy; what a crash. I haven't had a letdown like that in years."

"You and me," Dale said. "Call up Harkover, will you? Tell him it was a rousing success and that Hollywood is clamoring for it. Then remind him, subtly, that he's had a play of mine for three months, and will he for God's sakes get around to reading it?" He got up and stretched wearily, then walked around Betty Lou, surveying her from all angles. "Stand up," he said. Surprised, she got to her feet. "Open your coat." She looked at

Obie, wondering, then obeyed. Dale stepped close to her and put his arms around her and hugged her with all his strength. Then he put his lips against hers and kissed her, first tenderly, then firmly.

"Don't," she gasped. "Stop it."

He let her go. "I had to find out. Good God, girl, you're made of flesh and blood." He smoothed his shirt. "I thought I'd get full of splinters. You're warm, baby, warm. Last night I would have sworn you were stuffed. Not a bad experiment. We'll try it again some day."

She straightened her hat and brushed her hair into place. Her cheeks were burning. "I'm not stuffed," she said, her voice low.

"Damn-tooting, you're not. I won't be the same for a week." He shook his head sadly and stepped toward the door. "Life," he said, lifting his hand dramatically. "Boy, how that old bitch kicks you around." He shook his head. "Bum line. Phony. Trite. America's greatest playwright should do better than that. Well, be seeing you, folks." He waved as he went out, closing the door softly.

"He makes me sick," she said. "Always thinking of himself. How about all of us? You. You were going to call your mother. Why don't you try now? Maybe you can get her."

"Betty Lou," he said, softening. "You're sweet, all right. You can think about somebody else once in a while. The operator doesn't get any answer. Said she'd call me. I can't understand it." The phone rang and he picked it up eagerly. "Hello. Mom? How're you feeling? . . . Oh. . . . I was worried. . . . No. I'm fine. I'll be down tonight. . . . It's nothing serious, is it? . . . Well. Take care of yourself. . . . See you later."

He pulled out his handkerchief and ran it across his forehead, and sat there, staring at the wall.

"How is she?" she asked, anxiously. "Your mother?"

He turned to her as if he had forgotten that she was there. "Oh. I was just going to bawl you out when that phone rang. What did you want to let him hug you like that for?"

"Obie, don't be a child. You know there was nothing to that. And I asked you a question."

"You know," he said, reflectively, "nothing matters except the thing that's close to you. Other people's troubles bounce off you like bits of hail. Only your own cling to you. Dale's play is his whole life, and I worry along with him, and then something that's part of me comes along, and I forget that Dale ever existed. My mother. You were asking me. Well, it is not as bad as I thought. Has to go to the hospital for a general check-up. They think she'll get by without an operation. Woman's trouble. She sounded chipper enough."

"I'm glad," she breathed.

"You're changing the subject," he said, doggedly. "What was the idea of hugging Dale?"

"I told you it didn't mean anything. What could I do? Slap his face?"

"Sure. Or kick him where it would do the most good. You didn't have to turn your lips toward him the way you did."

"You notice everything, don't you?"

"Good God. I'd have to know you sixty-nine years before I'd have the nerve to hug you like that."

"Not sixty-nine years." She took a step toward him, so that her body almost touched his. He put his arms around her, just as Dale had done, and pulled her close

to him, pressing his lips to the side of her cheek. She let herself go this time, letting her body melt in his embrace.

He held her firmly, wondering, afraid to believe that it was really so. But there were other things, things of importance, one-act plays and ailing mothers. He drew his head back, watching her curiously. Her eyes were closed, her chin forward, her whole being leaning toward him for affection.

"Forgive me?" she said, softly.

"Sweet."

"He said I was stuffed," she said, still on the defensive. "I'm *not* stuffed, am I?"

The one-act play would be forgotten in a day, or a week, or a year. His mother's illness would clear up so that you wouldn't know it had ever existed. These are the cares of the moment that a form nestling closely can erase from an eager mind. This was what he needed, Betty Lou, young, vibrant, lovely. He pressed her close again, kissing her warmly, forgetting all else. "No, darling," he said, gently. "No, my sweet darling."

CHAPTER 6

THAT was the one-act play. And after it nothing happened, nothing that would change Connie's life. Time limped along. A month passed. Two months. Three months. Strange how dragging days can merge into months that fly. Only the full days, days too brief, make time stand still. And there aren't many days like that. Not nearly enough. You go to sleep and you get up the next day, and then you do it over and over again, and every now and then you tear a page from the calendar, knowing (or merely hoping) that a whole month could not possibly have gone by. But there it is, a stubborn page staring at you, and the next thing you know your permanent is growing out, or you're working on ads for fall clothes, so the spring and summer must have gone, but God knows where. Married three months. But it was only yesterday that you were married a whole week, frightened at the weeks and at the months ahead of you. At least that hasn't changed. You're still frightened, restless, and so is Dale.

There was Hank. You had lunch with him in the rear of his store, as pleasant a lunch as you ever had anywhere, and you were going to tell Dale about it in an off-hand way, but other topics came up instead and after a while you couldn't seem to find the right opportunity, so you said nothing. Once you dropped in at his store, really to buy

something for a girl at the office who was going on a cruise, but of course you could have gone to Spalding's or Abercrombie's. Then there was another visit, without the pretense of an excuse, and another lunch. But that was all, as you could tell your conscience if it needed reassurance, and at the same time you might mention that the days with Hank were the days that stayed with you, giving you something to take the dull sameness out of your life.

Evenings at home were wearing, you tired after a day at the office, and Dale sulking or working and not very good company in either case. Sometimes he tried to be bright and cheerful, the way he had been when surrounded by girls before they were married, but that was unusual. She knew his trouble. Nothing had clicked. Nothing. He hadn't even sold a Western. Not since the one-act play. Not a speech, or a travelogue, or a "Bright Sayings of Children." You need some bit of success to keep you going. A word of hope, a message of praise, a trifling check. No wonder he was in the dumps.

While you retain your confidence you don't have to fret about money. Bills will be paid somehow, and there will always be a meal around and perhaps a stray pack of cigarettes. Those were things an artist can put out of his mind. But it's not so easy when you haven't the lift that hope and confidence can give you. Connie could see that. They managed well enough on her salary, not luxuriously and not pinching pennies, but there was the difficulty of giving some of her money to Dale. How do you go about it? You can't hand him a dollar, or even ten, and you can't put him on any sort of allowance. She'd tried leaving bills around the house, carelessly, but he never touched them, not even to pay the tradesmen. Some day

she would try to get close to him, close enough to make a suggestion about partnerships and what's-mine-is-yours, that sort of stuff, and perhaps he would see it her way. She had to try. It wasn't easy to go on the way they were.

One Friday she came home, happy, excited, bursting with packages that were slipping from her eager arms. "I've splurged," she said. "Bargains all over the place. You'd never guess what five dollars could do in a bargain basement."

"Go ahead," he said, more cheerful than usual. "Tell me."

"Wait. Don't look. I'll arrange these things and then you tell me if you notice anything different." She shoed him into the kitchenette and tore the string and paper from her bundles. A wall-hanging, and a bright-bordered table-cloth, and a little lamp. She put the hanging up, hastily, with a few wavering pins, and spread the new cloth on the table, and plugged in the lamp and lit it. "Now," she called.

He entered, dramatically, and walked over to her and kissed her. "Greetings, Gwendolyn," he said. "You're quite sure your husband is away for the week-end?"

"Silly," she said. "Look around."

"Am I in the right place?"

"Where else do you get kisses?"

"I'm sure I never saw that lamp before. And those curtains. Nice. It really looks lovely."

"Curtains? They've been there for months. The wall-hanging, and this new table-cloth."

"Say, that's right. It looks fine. You have an eye for that sort of thing."

She walked around the room, surveying her changes with satisfaction. "We have to do *some* fixing up in the

fall. I'm going to have that easy-chair re-covered. I wanted to get wall-paper but it's too expensive. Twenty-five dollars. Some day, maybe. Do you know anything about decorating?"

"No. Don't let the wave fool you." He patted his hair delicately, burlesquing. "I'm really very strong."

"I put a big dent in our money," she said, watching his face carefully. "I'm foolish that way. As soon as we get paid I start rushing around trying to spend it. That lamp cost two forty-nine. There are other things I'd like to get. Carpeting. Dull red carpeting. Next month, maybe. We can make this place look like something."

"It looks all right," he said.

"I don't manage well. I'm too scatter-brained. You could do it so much better. Dale," she said, earnestly, "why don't you help me? You take care of the money. Pay for things, and all that. Will you?"

He looked at her for a moment. "No," he said, shortly.

"Oh, come on," she said, unwilling to give up. Why couldn't she get close to him? She was talking to a stranger. She opened her purse and took out the folded bills. "I still have about thirty-five left." She held it in her hand for a while, and then put it down on the table.

"How entertaining," he said, turning away.

"Dale." Now she was pleading, something she didn't want to do. If you're married to a person you should be part of him. "What is this, anyway? I'm not giving you anything. When I have money I'll pay for things. When you have it I'm sure you'll do the same. It's a fair arrangement, isn't it?"

"I wouldn't know," he said, coldly. "Did I marry you for money?"

"Didn't you?" She tried to be jocular. "I had forty

dollars. What's happened to it?" She spread her hands. "Gone with the wind. My lovely dowry. If it wasn't my money, what did you marry me for?"

He took a step toward her and held out his arms invitingly. "Your warmth," he said, grinning. "Your soul. Your passions."

She could feel her face go red. "Go ahead," she said, miserably. "Be funny."

"I take it back," he said, readily. "I didn't mean to plague you. We skidded right off the subject." He glanced at the wall-hanging. "Oh," he said, casually, "while you're getting things you might invest in a new tea-pot. An aluminum one, preferably. My elbows seem to have a strange affinity for pottery——"

She ran to the open book-shelf. "My Wedgwood pot! Did you break it?"

"I was getting a book. Why don't we keep things of that sort in the kitchen?"

"You'd manage to find it," she said, annoyed. "You go lumbering around the house like a bull. Whatever made you do it?"

"Wait, Connie. I'm not going to explain the motive behind something that was obviously an accident. I bumped it. That's all. I assure you there was no malice aforethought."

"I got it from my mother," she said, to be sure that he knew the enormity of the offense.

"O.K.," he said, impatiently. "You know I'm not sentimental. Especially my elbows." He knelt down and reached into the little cupboard under the shelves. "Lucky I saved the pieces. I was going to ask you if they were valuable. I'll get some cement and mend it. I used to be very good at that sort of thing." He got to his feet, the

pieces in his hands. "Aren't you glad to have the sort of husband who can fix things?"

"Yes," she said, unhappy, but not because the pot was broken. "I should be glad to have any sort of husband. There's nothing on earth as bad as a cranky old maid, especially when she's married."

He deposited the broken parts carefully on the table, and put his arm around her shoulder. "You're all tied up in a mess of paradoxes."

"I don't want to be nasty. I know you didn't mean to break it. I'm just on edge. I've been fretting about this money business. About you, I mean. Why can't I help you? Why can't we be partners, whatever we have belonging to both of us? I'd be so much happier."

"Sure you would. So would I, if I had anything to contribute. Just now you're running the works. You know I haven't earned a cent in months. That's the way it is with plays. All or nothing. You don't sell half a play, or eight percent. And when you're in that sad condition your income naturally hovers around the zero mark. I'm not ashamed of that. It's the way I was before I was married and the way I'm going to go on being. I wouldn't take a job. Not today or ten years from today. Not that I don't appreciate the advantages of a steady income. Look at you. A nice regular salary every week, just for writing a few trite ads, saying things that have been said before, perhaps no better but surely no worse. What is there to it, compared to writing a play? You describe a hat. It has flowers on it, or a windmill. You have the artist draw a picture of it. The price is four ninety-eight. Women buy the hat, and you get a raise. I play with words, with emotions, with people, create them, move them, juggle them, put life and feeling into their bones, tear my heart out and slip it into the charac-

ters I'm moulding. You get your forty a week and week-ends off and a vacation. I get damned up and down the countryside and have to call on old Cowboy Waffles to save me from utter rout. That's art compared with big business. I'm going to go on being an artist."

"I want you to," she said. "You know that. You're working for the future. Nothing can ever happen to me. Nothing big. You're going to *do* things. I know. I'll buy shares in you. You're going to have people talking about you when women's hats are forgotten. That's the difference between us."

The warm color came into his cheeks. "Thanks," he said, in a low tone. "I need something like that. Sometimes I wonder if I'm the only guy in all the world who thinks I'll make good. *I* know it. I do. It may take years to convince others. Producers, and people. The rest of the world. I can struggle along because I know I'll get there. It's nice to have you alongside of me."

"I'm with you," she breathed. "All the way."

The bills were still on the table. He looked at them as if they were of no importance, and then picked them up and put them in his pocket. "I'll do it your way," he said, "if you really want it. Combining our fortunes. Mine jingles and yours rustles, a difference of trifling importance."

She stepped closer to him and he put his arms around her. "I'm glad," she said. "How about eating?"

"Good old Connie. Always reacting to emotions with an outburst of hunger." He glanced at the new lamp and the hanging above it. "That wall business is nice," he said. "It gives the room a lift."

The next day was Saturday. She had only change in her purse. She should have kept a dollar or two, but when

you make a gesture like that it has to be all or nothing. Monday, if he didn't mention it, she would have to ask him for a sort of refund, enough to see her through the week. But of course he would think of it himself. That was the way their relationship should be, smooth, easy-going, without problems, without scraps, without embarrassment. They weren't at that point, yet, but this money arrangement should help. Partners. Why shouldn't they be, two people who were so close in so many other ways? What's yours is mine, and so forth, and what difference does it make who holds the money or spends it? But on Monday it never occurred to him that she might be entirely without funds, and her pride wouldn't let her tell him, so she went to the office with a few odd coins in her purse, just enough for carfare and a sandwich at the Automat, but after that she was completely broke. He would think of it during the day, and mention it when he saw her, and they would laugh at his forgetfulness, and she would say it didn't matter, food wasn't important as long as she was happy. Or something like that.

That evening he was in a strange mood, as if he expected to be caught at some prank and was preparing his defenses in advance. They ate at a small tea-room where you could get a simple dinner for sixty cents, and he was unusually silent through the meal, and when he took out his money to pay the check she thought she saw only a couple of bills. But of course that was ridiculous. She had given him thirty-five dollars.

"Let's walk a bit," he said, as they stood in indecision in the street. "I don't feel like working tonight."

"Do much today?" she asked, knowing that he liked to talk about his plays.

"Don't check up on me," he said, crossly. "I can't turn in a work sheet at the end of every day."

She looked at him in surprise. "You know I'm not checking up. I'm sorry if my unaccustomed politeness jars you."

"Well, if you must know, I put a sheet of paper in the typewriter and it's still there. Nice and blank. That's the way I always start. A blank piece of paper and a prayer. Maybe I don't put enough into my praying. I certainly got no response today."

"You know it doesn't matter. You're not writing plays on an eight-hour-day basis. You don't have to be down in the dumps because you've wasted a day. You have a long lifetime ahead of you."

"I know." He walked along in his odd way, slouched, comfortable, his hands in his pockets, his feet scraping the ground, and sometimes he seemed to forget that she was with him as he went on ahead of her. Then she had to quicken her pace to reach his side. If he stayed in this mood she would never be able to ask him for the money. That was funny. Asking him for *her* money. And afraid to do it, watching for a favorable opportunity so that she wouldn't upset his tender feelings.

It was no use. He wasn't going to mention it, so it was up to her to work the conversation around to her plight. After all, she *did* have to get to her office, and she *did* have to eat, and if he hadn't sense enough to realize it there could be no harm in reminding him. She was such a fool. She should have kept five dollars, two dollars, anything to avoid this moment. Now she was letting it upset her, and she realized that it was the first time in her life that money had assumed any importance in her scheme of things. After a while she thought the time ripe

to get the conversation going again. "What did you do?" she asked.

"Oh, loafed, mostly. Stopped at the Bridge Club for a while. Walked around a bit. When I decide to loaf I'm an expert. I can drag a telephone call out into three days. One day I look up a number. Next day I think about it. The third day I make the call. If I get a busy signal I can make an extra day out of it."

"What does it get you?" she asked, thinking of all the little things that could be done around the house.

"Time passes, bringing me one day closer to the happy day assigned to me somewhere off in the future. There's a day marked off for Edwin, a glamorous day with a shiny red circle around it, and it's sitting there, waiting patiently for me to come and get it. All I can do is help time pass. Sometimes I do it by working, sometimes by loafing."

He could go on that way, talking easily of the things he chose, leaving her wondering about the one or two bills she had seen as he virtually emptied his pocket to pay the dinner check. What could have happened to the rest of it? Perhaps he had it in one of his other pockets. It must be something like that. He wouldn't spend it foolishly, knowing how careful they had to be. Was he betting on horses? She knew that he liked to gamble. No, he wouldn't do that. She'd trusted him. That was funny, trusting him. All you give a man is your life, your body, your whole future, and then you wonder if you can trust him with a week's pay. It was silly.

Suddenly, on impulse, she opened her purse, reaching for her cigarettes, and then held it before him, so that he could see. "Gosh," she said, trying to make it sound natural, "I'm broke. I haven't even a dime."

"Oh, are you?" He reached into his pocket and came out with a dollar bill. "I don't seem to have much on me. Wait, I have some change." He fumbled in another pocket.

"Dale," she said, her heart sinking.

"I suppose I might as well tell you. They sort of cleaned me at the Bridge Club."

"Dale," she said, heavily. "You didn't. Not all our money."

"Not at bridge. In fact I won a dollar forty. I suppose that started it. We played show-down for dimes, and then it was for dollars. I thought I'd win enough for you to buy those things you wanted for the house. Funny. I was twenty dollars ahead at one time. Then they started betting on the side, high spade and other dopey things. Boy, that goes fast. There'd be twelve or fifteen dollars in a pot, and it went just like that. You can win a lot in that sort of game. It gets you, seeing all that money piled up, and knowing that you almost won the last pot." He shook his head. "They took me, though. One bad streak and you're through."

"How much did you lose?"

"Thirty-two dollars, I think."

"Thirty-two dollars." She pounded her palm with her fist, slowly, methodically, as if deciding on a drastic course of action. "Thirty-two dollars. A mere trifle, compared to all the millions you're going to make. But just now it leaves us sort of penniless."

"We're not so broke," he said, without a touch of repentance. "You can stretch a dollar a long way if you have to."

It wasn't the money. She knew it wasn't the money. It was his attitude, his feeling toward her. He didn't care.

He'd lost it in some silly gambling game, and it made no impression on him. In fact, he was all ready to be annoyed at her, as if he could find some way to pin the blame on her. Strange that she couldn't feel angry. It was as if something had died inside of her, leaving her without feeling. What had happened to their partnership? Was that all over, knowing now that she could not depend on him? What was their relationship going to be from now on?

"Well," he said, after a while, "say something."

"What can I say? I'm not pleased. You know that. Am I supposed to scold you? You're a grown intelligent man. What do *you* think?"

"You can be just as bitter without scolding. You can jump on a fellow with one of those adorable frowns. Frankly, I don't like it any more than if you had shouted at me."

"You're certainly rushing to the defensive. I haven't said a word."

"No. What you do is a damned sight worse. Tighten up inside and go sour at the whole world. Well, you don't have to do it. You'll get your money back. I didn't ask for it in the first place. Here, darling, a great big generous gesture, I'm going to let you fondle all this lovely green money and pay all the butcher bills and the grocery bills. Well, I gambled with it, and I lost it, and I'll owe it to you and pay you back as soon as I'm able. I'll give you a promissory note, if you want."

"No," she said, with an effort, "I trust you."

Back in their room, Dale slipped his shoes off and put his stockinged feet on the table, slumping far back in the easy chair. He took long drags at his cigarette, watching the thin clouds of smoke as they spiraled toward the

ceiling. Connie sat on one of the wooden chairs, leaning forward stiffly, staring through the room at nothing. After a while he shifted. "Smoke?" he said.

"No," she answered, mechanically. "Yes."

He held out the pack to her without rising. She glanced at it for a moment, then decided not to get up. She shook her head slowly, wondering if he would make the tremendous effort needed to get the cigarettes to her. He tossed them carelessly on the table, still out of her reach. She sat there, but he made no further move, so she got up with an air of resignation and lit one for herself. Then she went back to her chair.

"I suppose," he said, watching her feeble rings, "that you would refer to this as a quarrel."

"I don't know." There was strain in her effort to make her voice sound natural. "There haven't been any knock-outs. Yet."

"Not me. I don't express myself by action. If I can't hurt by words I go home."

"You've done all right," she said. "So far."

"What did I say?"

"I don't remember. The words don't matter. You were bitter."

"I suppose so. I can manage to get pretty sarcastic, even when I don't particularly mean it."

"You meant it."

"Probably." He was talking calmly, as if they were discussing something outside of themselves. "I have the preposterous habit of saying what I think. How to lose friends. Wives, maybe."

"No," she said, unhappily.

"Let's look at it calmly. We don't have to get hysterical. We can talk. Or can't we?"

"I'm all right."

"It seems," he said, casually, "that I did something that I shouldn't have done. That obviously gives you the right to tear me apart."

"What have *I* done?" she asked, trying to suppress her rising feelings. "Somehow this works around to the point where I'm completely in the wrong. A quick twist of your clever phrasing and you'll have me apologizing all over the place. All right, if you want it that way. I'm sorry. God knows for what."

"Wait, Connie. I thought I might have a word of explanation. You want to close the case and sentence me without even listening."

She dropped her head, abashed. "Go ahead."

"You know I've always been irresponsible. I buy first editions instead of blue-plate dinners. People put too much emphasis on three meals a day." He shrugged. "I'm not that way. What must I do? Change?"

"No," she said, eagerly. "No. I don't want you to. I understand the way you feel. I can go without food, too. It isn't that. But we *do* have an economic problem. You must admit that. We have this apartment, and the bills that go with it. I'm not trying to stint and save. I just want to get along. That's not unreasonable, is it? Just getting along?"

"It's all right with me. I didn't ask you for the money. You dump it in my lap and then tell me to be careful with every penny. Hang on to it yourself, if it's *so* important. I'm not going to be a damned bookkeeper, accepting my reward by sneaking nickels out of the family till. Do it your way."

"It's easier to be bitter," she said, her voice rising, "knowing that you're completely in the wrong, using your attack on me as a defense. Keep it up. You're not fooling me."

"Really." He ground his cigarette into the tray. "I suppose I was gambling for my own needs. I'd run out and buy silk shirts and six-dollar ties with my winnings. It didn't occur to you that I might have been doing it for you. For your carpeting and curtains and whatever else it was you were crying about. You could hunt and hunt and not find a decent motive about your dear and only husband. It's nice, knowing that."

She got to her feet and stood before him. "It's nothing but a speech for a creaky third act, and it doesn't fool either you or me, because we both know you too well. You're a self-ordained big shot. You can't bear being out of the swim. If the fellows at the club gamble for dimes you're right along with them, and if they switch to dollars you haven't the guts to tell them that you can't afford it. We know there are Hollywood millions coming to you, but meanwhile we have to struggle along on what I earn. Tell them that, why don't you?"

"That's enough," he said, coldly. "Frankly, you're beginning to bore me." He struggled from the chair and stood beside her for a moment, his mouth tense, and then he turned and went into the bathroom. She sat down, tight all over, unable to move, or think, or cry. She didn't want to say the things she'd said, but you can bear only so much. He knew he was in the wrong, but the last thing that his ego would allow was admission of guilt. It was so much easier for him to pin the blame on her, on her unreasonable desires for a nice home. And they were going to talk things over sensibly. Only married couples are ugly to each other. She'd never spoken like that to a friend or a relative or a co-worker, not to anybody in all her life. Only to her husband. To love, and honor, and cherish, until death do us part.

She turned back the covers of the day-bed. She would

get into bed, and later he would slip in beside her, his body close to hers. That was another of the strange things about marriage. Things you wouldn't think of, unless moved by a terrific urge, become a matter of routine. Even if love were wavering, or in retreat. Was theirs? Something had slipped. It wasn't only this occurrence, which was unimportant in itself. It was a question of attitudes. You can forgive things most flagrant, or glower at trifles, depending on your feeling toward the other person at the moment.

The water was still splashing in the bathroom. She would have to wait until he was finished. She reached to the low book-shelf for a book, and then she saw her tea-pot. He had mended it. A lump leaped to her throat. Then he *did* think of her, of her happiness, of helping in his little way to make their home a lovelier place. Perhaps he *had* tried to make that money for her. What he said about luxuries for himself was certainly true. He never indulged himself in any way whatsoever. "Dale," she called, wanting to cry. He couldn't hear her above the roar of the water. "Dale," she said, softly, to herself. She held the little pot at arm's length, and could scarcely notice the cracks. It was a little thing, but that was what moved her. Little things.

They would make up. They always did. Sometimes they merely let a quarrel slip away from them, as if it had never existed. Once in a while they talked things over and came to some sensible conclusion. And other times they lost their differences in a warm embrace. But there was always this. You could mend the breaks again and again, but the cracks show, just as they did in her lovely tea-pot, now sound and whole and surely not as strong as it was before.

CHAPTER 7

"BUDDY, can you spare a dime? I ain't had a bite today—"

They seemed to come in an endless stream, and still at the end of the week it never amounted to more than two or three dollars. That was the penalty of having your store located in the low-rent section, down on lower Third Avenue. Bums, derelicts, pan-handlers, all day long, and Hank had made it a policy never to refuse. Sure some of them had twenty-six thousand dollars sewn into their mattresses, sure they owned blocks of apartment houses in Flatbush, sure they had their chauffeurs waiting for them with the Cadillac on some deserted side-street, but every now and then you got a poor slob who was really hungry, and it was better to fatten up a few plutocrats than to turn a needy guy away. Anyhow, he didn't believe those stories. Maybe one in a thousand had something. Maybe less. They don't go around begging unless they're broke.

You sit down and think things over. You want to help. Don't kid me about the pampered poor. I see them. They're my neighbors. There are hundreds of them right around this section. I've seen youngsters die that should have been saved, kids with their bodies too frail from undernourishment to withstand an ordinary illness. Pampered, eh? Spoiled, living in luxury, making payments on their cars with relief checks. Didn't Congressman Soandso prove it? Sure he did, he found one, two, five, in a country

of millions. He forgot about those kids starving (listed in the hospital wards as pneumonia) because you can't buy the right food for a family on relief checks. You can't. Say, don't tell me. I see these people. I spend hours with skinny kids with big eyes and swollen stomachs who're still hoping for their first glass of orange juice.

The door opened slowly, hesitantly. The bums never breezed in. They weren't brazen. They were begging. This time it was a kid. "Shine, Mister?" he called, hopefully.

Hank glanced down at his shoes. "I've had two shines today."

"Good shine. Give you a good shine, mister. Five cents."

"Look," Hank said. "You mustn't knock your competitors. I've had a good shine. Two of them. You have to learn the rules of American business. Cut your competitor's throat, but don't knock him." He reached toward his dime-box. "Come here. What's your name?"

"Mannie."

"Mannie what?"

"Di Salvo."

H'm. A foreigner. Piling up our gold to sneak back to his native land to live in luxury through his declining years. "Where were you born?"

"Over on Tent' Street."

Oh. That's different. Born here. Well, you're still a foreigner. One of your ancestors must have come from abroad, maybe Columbus or somebody. "How old are you?"

"Nine."

Skinny, small and skinny. They ought to start filling out at nine. "Got a father?"

"Sure. Fine pop."

"What's he do?"

"Shine. Six' Avenue. Pop was a baker, good times he made sixty dollars a week. No jobs last two three years, so he shines too. Not so hot."

"What do you have for breakfast?"

"Some days something, some days nothing. Today a salami sandwich. We get hot soup in school. Free. Soup and bread, maybe an apple." He stepped closer to Hank, sensing friendship. "Rainy days is tough. No shines. Pop says we ought to have different kinds of jobs so we both don't get stuck when it rains."

"Is he bitter?"

"What? Mad? No, not Pop. Mom says he's soft. You know, easy. Never hits us."

"Is he on relief?"

The boy shook his head. "Nope. They talked about it. Pop says he won't do it."

"Thanks, son. Here." He gave him two of the precious dimes, and the boy thanked him and left, and then Hank was sorry that he hadn't given him more.

No breakfast some days. You couldn't be as skinny as that if you ate regular meals. And how about a family that refuses relief? Foreigners, too, with their mattresses stuffed with hundred-dollar bills. How about that? One, sure that's all right, just one, and you can't go around drawing conclusions from any one family. Unless, of course, it's one of the pampered families that's living in new luxury at the taxpayer's expense. He glanced at his dime-box. It was almost empty. He'd have to get some more change, to go on helping in his own way. Little enough, Brady, for a fellow who feels these things. A dime for coffee and doughnuts. Funny, and he couldn't afford

that, but he'd got into the habit, and anyhow, it was the least he could do. You can spread that over your conscience as if it were a balm, and kid yourself into thinking you were doing something, after all.

"Say, Buddy, can you stake us to a meal? I ain't had a bite—" Same old line. Same old dime. Say, Buddy, and thanks, Buddy, you were Buddy to all of them as long as the dimes held out. Maybe he was lucky he wasn't farther uptown. Up there they'd be asking for quarters.

Baxter kept hunting long after he knew the futility of it all. Who was going to leave a five-dollar bill on the pavement, waiting for its owner to show up and claim it? And still he retraced his steps, not once but a dozen times, eyes glued to the ground. It might still be around. Maybe if he didn't step on a single crack for a whole block it would turn up. He'd tried that before, but somebody jostled him and his foot touched the corner of a square. Whiskers again, his pet jinx bumping him just as he was about to complete his assignment. It was no use. He could look and look but that five dollars was gone forever.

He'd never been that careless before. Well, of course, he hadn't had five-dollar bills very often. You'd think he could do a simple thing like that; all Martha wanted him to do was to go to the Gas Company down on Fourteenth Street and pay the bill. Two months, two dollars and seven cents. Now he had to go home and tell her. That wouldn't be easy. She worked so hard and skimped and saved and sacrificed, and then he had to go out and lose her money. He couldn't tell her, that was all. He'd walk and walk until he dropped of weariness. Maybe if he went far enough he would find another bill. Not his, just some

other bill. If *he* could lose one, why couldn't somebody else? A ten-dollar bill, perhaps. That would be funny. He could tell Martha then, laughing at his good fortune. I can do it every day, lose a fiver in the morning and find a ten-spot in the afternoon. Bad? Heck, that would be a profit of thirty bucks a week, without working Sundays. But of course he might not find one.

He peered into the windows of the shops, disconsolate, not knowing what else to do. A pawn-shop, its windows crowded with mandolins and traveling bags. The first thing a person hocks must be his mandolin. He had nothing to sell, nothing that could bring even a dollar. Another store. Selling out. Going out of business. Maybe they need a good lawyer. No. No. Even if they did they'd probably know where to get one. Old magazines. He could stop in there for a while, glance at pictures and things, pretending he was going to buy. Sporting-goods. That was a nice store, bigger than the others. Hank Brady, Sports. Hank Brady. He knew Hank. Might as well go in and talk to him. Funny, he never realized that his store was down this way. Maybe he could borrow a few dollars from Hank, and pay it back to him out of his summons money.

He opened the door slowly, hesitantly, the way the bums did.

"Hello there," Hank said, pulling his instinctive hand back from the dime-box.

"Hello," Baxter said, softly, as if he were intruding. "Didn't think you'd remember me."

"Sure. Baxter Cunningham. How've you been?" He put out his hand and Baxter shook it, weakly.

"Fine. O.K." He looked around as if he were on a sight-seeing tour. "Nice place you got here."

"Big, anyhow, in case any one wants to try a mashie shot. You golf?"

Baxter shook his head. "No. Can't see much sense in it."

"Me neither. I like fast games, basketball and handball. I can hit a mean drive, though, if I catch it right." He swung an imaginary club and followed the flight of the ball. "Well. How's everybody? How's the family?"

Baxter nodded solemnly, putting his stamp of approval on the condition of the family. This was going to be harder than he thought. It's all right to cook up schemes while you're walking around in a daze, but it's different when you're faced with realities. What do you do? Pop right out with it. Listen old man, ran into a bit of hard luck—Or work up to it gradually, talk about the family and the weather and business generally, and then make it seem too trifling for words, as if it would be paid back within the next ten minutes. Start and stop, that was the way he did things these days, no pep, no fire, no decision. Maybe that was why he couldn't catch on anywhere. He tried to pull himself together, to look important. "I say, Brady," he said, spacing his words, "funny thing happened. Lucky I ran into you." That was the way. Make it seem that you're doing the other fellow a favor. Put on an act. "I—er—I—" and then he slumped. "Hank," he said, pitifully, "help me. For God's sakes, help me."

Hank looked at him, wondering. "What's wrong? What's happened?"

Baxter spread his hands and let them drop to his side. "I'm getting worse and worse," he said, throwing himself on Hank's mercy. "Martha gave me five dollars to pay the gas and light bill and I lost it. God. You don't know what five dollars means to us." He shook his head, lost in

his grief. "I don't know how it could have happened. I must have pulled it out with my handkerchief. Something like that. I can't figure it out. I don't know. I can't seem to do anything right these days."

"Well," Hank said, "that isn't so bad. I think we can fix that up."

Baxter stood there, swaying slightly on uncertain legs. "It isn't the money, so much. It's everything. Being down and out. I can't seem to get going. I know what it is. I'm jinxed. Yes, sir. I have my private jinx. I've even named him. Whiskers. He doesn't let me alone. Ever." His voice thinned to a whine. "He won't let me do anything. I don't know why I hang on. If I had any guts I'd kill myself. That's my trouble. No guts. Look. I wanted to breeze in here, big shot, and work around to a loan. The way the bankers do. The broker they are the bigger the front. It's funny. Me. I haven't the nerve to look a cat in the eye. I'm all washed up." You could see him dropping, shrinking, as if he would slip through his clothes. "There you are, Brady. The life and troubles of Baxter Cunningham, Third." He turned toward the door. "Sorry. Sorry I bothered you. That's all I'm good for now. Bothering people."

"Wait a second." Hank could feel his heart sink with Baxter's. This fellow didn't need five dollars. That was nothing, an empty symbol. He needed confidence, opportunity, life itself, the chance to live. He'd slipped because he had no job, and for that reason nobody would give him one. Talk about your vicious cycles. It was like refusing to feed the starving because they had the impudence to be hungry.

Baxter shook his head. "It's no use. I don't want to take it now. I didn't mean to beg."

"Stay here." Hank motioned to a chair. "I want to figure this out." He might be able to do it. The chance to help. Don't you remember? You were going to do things, you with your powerful shoulders and quick lithe legs, you were going to be one of the people, of the common people, to work with them, help them, lead them. A leader of men. Brady doing his bit, handing out dimes, his head high and his chest out, doing his bit for mankind. All right, saviour, here's something dumped right into your lap, and you can buy your way out with a five-dollar bill. "You know," he said, slowly, "I could use an assistant here."

"Could you?" Baxter asked, anxiously. "I can sell. I worked in Hearn's for a while. Boys' clothing." He took an eager step toward Hank.

You can't let a fellow down like that. You can't. Even if it doesn't quite figure. "Part time," Hank said, hedging. "I can't afford much. Would you like to try it, afternoons only? Say ten bucks a week?"

"Ten dollars!" You could hear the quick intake of his breath. "God. That would be wonderful. We could live again." Baxter stood there, shaking his head, as if unable to believe his good fortune. Then he passed his hand across his forehead, his fingers trembling. "I can't do it," he said, his voice rising. "Don't start with me, Hank. You're too decent. I spoil things. Old Whiskers follows me around. I can't bring him down on you too."

"That's a fine sales talk. Selling yourself. Come out of it. I don't believe in that stuff."

"I bring hard luck wherever I go. Everything I touch goes wrong. I know. Two of my employers killed themselves. Another one went broke. I have some record." He scratched his cheek nervously. "I can't understand it."

All I know is that it happens. If it isn't the jinx, what is it?"

Hank looked at him, his mouth set. "Take it or leave it. I'm not fooling around with jinxes, whiskers or not. It's up to you."

"I want it. I never wanted anything so much. That's childish, isn't it, about the jinx? I want to work for you. I'll do anything, anything. I'll scrub your floors or—draw up your contracts." He smiled, eagerly. "I have a great variety of talents."

"O. K.," Hank said, brusquely. "See you tomorrow. About one. Hours'll be one until closing time. Guess that means you'll be late for supper."

"What difference does it make? I probably won't want to eat. I forget, what does happiness make you do, eat or not? Whatever it is I'll do it."

"Wait a second," Hank said, visions of a furious Gas Company bothering him. "I might as well give you a week's salary in advance."

"Thanks," Baxter breathed, taking the money. He went to the door, then turned and waved, overcome by his new happiness.

Hank returned his wave as the door closed. Then he sat down, surprised that he was so tired. An emotional experience. It must have been, because he felt worn out. Well, that was that. Ten dollars a week. He could just about make it. Maybe business would pick up a bit, now that he had an assistant. He couldn't quite understand how, but there was no harm in hoping. Anyhow, he'd have somebody to talk to during the dragging moments of the day.

At least he'd done something, something more than hand a dime to a bum. This was constructive, the sort of

thing he'd been feeling inside of him for years. Solving the problems of the universe. If a fellow is down and out and needs a job, what good is there in spouting proverbs at him? You'd throw him a rope if he were drowning, wouldn't you? Yes, and you'd probably risk your damned-fool life jumping into the water after him. And then you'd leave him to starve, or go to pieces in his own sweet way.

But Bax dragged people down with him. He said so himself. There must be more than coincidence to the things that happened to his bosses. Hank frowned. Old Whiskers was going to get him too, if he didn't watch out. But we don't believe in jinxes. We have troubles enough around here without inventing a few. He glanced at the cash register. Not such a hot day. That was the way it was. All sorts of people come into a sporting-goods store, except customers. Well, you can't have everything. Jinxes and down-and-outers, and every now and then somebody who made a purchase. But he'd catch up. Maybe. Meanwhile he'd taken on an added burden, and it might be just a bit more than he could bear.

He frowned, annoyed with himself. Solving problems, and things. Stick to your dimes, son. What in hell was *he* doing, dabbling in universes? He was glad he could pay his rent.

CHAPTER 8

MARTHA had worked out her own system, surely not new or original, of dividing her days into morning, noon, and night, and somehow they seemed to flow more easily that way. Things break into each of the parts, flooding them with happiness or searing them with despair, but at least they help the time pass. The better things can linger with you, sweet to the touch and to the memory, taking some of the sting out of the times you want to forget. Glad tidings to swell the heart, like Baxter getting a job. A job! You can say that over and over again, the stark beauty of the short jolting word striking you now for the first time. And your mind starts skipping happily, like a child with a rope, for you can see visions ahead, hope for the future. You've been managing without any income from Baxter, so you'll go on that way, putting his new and important ten dollars aside, and at the end of the year you will have five hundred dollars saved. Five hundred dollars! With that in the bank there would be no question about having your baby. Strange how new people, people you scarcely know, start taking an important part in moulding your future. Now it was Hank Brady.

"Ask him up here," Martha said, at the breakfast table. "He must be lonely evenings. Does he play bridge? Dale and Connie are coming tonight. I haven't tried to get a fourth yet."

"I think he plays," Baxter said. "I've seen him solving

those silly problems in the newspapers. He is lonely. He's told me. I'm sure he'll be glad to come."

"O.K. Try to get him, and I won't ask anybody else. Don't coax him, though. See if he really wants to come."

She hummed happily as she put on her hat and coat. You don't need much to lift you a notch. Just a breath of good fortune, not a windfall. Her neighbor was humming too. You could hear her through the thin partitions. Martha stepped into the hall as Mrs. Crossi opened the door to put her garbage out. She smiled her wide white smile. "How's the baby?" Martha called.

"Fine. He's a fine boy." She had him tucked under one arm as if he were a bundle of old clothes. "Say hello to Miss Cunningham," she said, prodding him with her finger. The baby looked up with a shy smile.

"He's a little angel," Martha said. "Some day I'm going to ask you to let me mind him. For a whole day. Some Sunday." She chucked him under the chin and he cooed happily. "See? He likes me."

"Sure. Everybody like you." She hitched the baby up a notch and trudged back to her apartment.

Martha went down the stairs, wondering at the excited beating of her heart. Merely touching the baby, poking at his cheek as you would to a dog. But it meant something, more now than ever. She'd watched him develop from a tiny shaver a few months ago, a helpless puny dark little thing, and now he was a real person, just past his first birthday, able to stand and to smile and to show that he knew you, and to clasp your finger in his pudgy hands until you felt that your heart was going to melt.

Taking care of babies was a cinch. You shove them under your arm like a pillow while you put the garbage out in the hall. You put them in a play-pen and let them

sit there and coo at you as you go about your household tasks. You feed them when they are hungry and you put them to bed when they are sleepy, and they grow up big and strong and healthy and your life is complete. Look at Petie, growing and blooming, and you could bet your bottom dollar that Mrs. Crossi had never read a book on child psychology in her life.

Martha would be different with her baby. He would have the advantage of the care of a more enlightened parent. Even now she read the baby columns in the newspapers, and remembered the things you were supposed to do or not to do. Even now she followed with sickening apprehension the news of unusual accidents to babies, falling from fire-escapes or suffocating in their cribs. Those things frightened her, made her weak inside, not only for her baby but for babies everywhere in all the world, and she knew that her life would be one of unceasing care and devotion to her baby. Of course she would have to have one first. But they'd get around to that, because in only a year they would have five hundred dollars, and surely you won't have to hesitate when you have all that money.

"Baxter doesn't play," Martha explained to Hank. "I've tried to teach him but he won't concentrate. Friday is supposed to be our bridge evening. Dale loves a good game. If we can't arrange one he drops over to the Bridge Club. I can take it or leave it alone. I like a nice homey game where you can make mistakes all over the place and talk about pot roast while you're playing a hand. I hear you're a champ."

Hank shook his head. "I play a medium game." He looked around and nodded approvingly. "I'm glad you asked me. It's nice being in a home now and then. I mean,

curtains, and a sink, and your own bathroom. I've been living at the Y. It's inexpensive, and I like being near the gym and swimming pool."

They could hear the crying of the baby next door, then the soft crooning of his mother, singing to him in Italian. "We don't miss a thing here," Martha said. "That's the regular procedure in this place. Petie howls when they put him down, and then Rosetta sings him to sleep. What's that she sings, Bax?"

"Drigo Serenade."

"Drigo Serenade." Martha hummed the first few bars. "And how it works. Not another chirp out of him until six A.M." Dale and Connie arrived a few minutes later, and by that time Petie had stopped his crying and the singing was fading softly into silence.

"Our nightly concert," Martha said. "Sung by Rosetta Crossi, with sound effects by little Petie. You came in for the grand finale. Do you know everybody?"

Connie and Dale shook hands with Hank and with Baxter. "Hello, Brady," Dale said. "You play bridge? Martha usually manages to dig up a school chum who's still reading Hoyle on Whist. I'd rather have young Garibaldi next door."

"Hank plays," Martha said. "Don't worry about your silly game. I would have invited the baby but I didn't want to raise the level of our game."

"Must we play?" Connie asked. "I'm tired. I'd rather sit around and talk."

"Talk?" Dale glared at her. "Talk about what?" He stepped over to the cabinet and found a deck of cards and some paper for scoring. "Come on."

Baxter set up the folding table and they stood around it. Dale spread the cards, picked one and turned it over. Con-

nie bit her lip and turned a card, and then Martha and Hank followed suit. Baxter went over to the soft chair in the corner and dropped into it, his part in the proceedings finished.

"You and I," Dale said to Martha. "I should have stayed home." They took their places. "Customary fortieth?"

Martha nodded. "Even at that it should be more profitable than writing plays."

Dale looked at her, sharply, then said nothing and started to shuffle the cards.

Baxter watched them for a few minutes, watched with his eyes only, not absorbing what went on before him. He looked around mechanically for a newspaper, knowing he would not read one if he found it. There was yesterday's paper across the room, or perhaps it was from the day before, but he didn't bother to get up and get it. He scarcely read the papers any more. Just glanced at the headlines. He didn't read anything. He'd tried the mysteries Martha brought home, but he couldn't concentrate for more than two or three pages. Then his mind would start slipping, back, back through the years, to dwell on little unimportant things that had happened long ago. Sometimes he would force himself into the present, especially when people were talking to him, but it was too great an effort, and often he would be stumped by a question he hadn't even heard, the other person staring at him, waiting.

It was better when they played bridge. They didn't bother him then, and he could sit and pretend that he was watching and let his thoughts wander. It was good to know that he had a job again. It gave him something to do, and less time for fretting. He'd been getting into an awful state, neglecting to use his mind at all. He'd have

to get over that, now that he was working. Listen to people. You can do it. Concentrate. This is today, not twenty years ago. Try. Try now. Dale was saying, You should have switched, you don't have to return my suit, that's papa-mama bridge. Words, words. He had no idea in the world what they meant. I'm sorry, Martha said. She must have done something wrong. I'm sorry. The girl in the office across the hall—what was the name of that firm?—that was what she had said. I'm sorry. She'd backed into him. That had started a real friendship, almost a romance. He'd taken her to lunch a few times, and she liked him, she really did, and then one day he'd mentioned his wife, and she froze, and she wouldn't see him again, after that. Some day he might run into her, and maybe they could have lunch again. Every now and then he thought he saw her on the street, and then he would realize that he was looking at a young girl, twenty-five or so, and this one would be at least forty, because that was fifteen years ago.

He shifted lazily. Nice going, partner, Dale said. Dale seemed to be running the game. He condemned, or praised, and the others accepted his judgment. Stupid game. They were always at each other. He wouldn't play. It was too great a strain, and it left your mind too tired. Even dreaming was tiring. Sometimes he could sit for hours and do nothing at all, not even think. It was easier that way.

The door outside slammed and they could hear voices in the hall. "They're going out," Martha said. "They put the poor kid to sleep and then go away for the evening."

"I wouldn't worry about him," Connie said. "If his mother doesn't."

But she couldn't help it. He was a living lovely human

being, and her heart sank every time she thought that something might be happening to him. "Suppose there were a fire? They lock the door. I've told her a dozen times to leave the key with us."

"We'll save him," Dale said, cheerily. "Won't we, Brady? We'll make a human chain and swing him clear into Kings County. Who deals?"

"I'll take it," Hank said. "You've dealt three times in a row."

"He's fussing," Martha said, staring at the wall. "Can't you hear him?"

They all listened. Connie shook her head. "Street noises. It doesn't sound like a baby."

"Let him alone," Dale said. "I'll bet Rosetta doesn't look at him from night till morning. There's one thing about a baby. When he needs attention, you either hear him or you smell him. Outside of that you don't have to bother much."

"I feel some responsibility," Martha said, firmly. "He can't take care of himself. He might get tangled in the blankets and suffocate. I see items like that in the papers every day."

"Never these poor kids," Dale said. "They get life in small doses and become immunized against it. It's always the child with seven nurses. They turn their backs for four seconds and the brat swallows a gold-fish, bowl and all."

Martha sat there, looking straight ahead, while her partner played out a hand. Not hers. Not Martha's baby. He wouldn't swallow anything, except what she fed him with loving hands. Because she would shower him with her affection, love him and watch him every minute of every day. Follow him in his play, and help him to learn

new things, and hold him and love him. But of course she couldn't if she had to work, and certainly she would have to work if she expected the baby to eat. They didn't matter, Baxter and herself, but the kid, you can't stint and save at the expense of the baby. Silly, people might say, how much does a baby eat? Well, you have to get Grade A milk, and cod liver oil, and those cute little jars of prepared vegetables that she loved to look at in the drug store. It all ran into money, more than Baxter's new-found ten dollars per week, but of course they were going to save that, and by the time a year rolled around business might be much better and he could be getting a real salary.

She shouldn't wait too long. She knew that. There's more chance of things happening when you get along in years. Bad things. She didn't care about herself, but it might affect the baby. And after waiting as long as they had they ought to have a perfect baby. That was the least the fates could do for them. She mustn't die in child-birth, because then there would be nobody to look after him. She wouldn't die. It was her destiny. She would have her baby in spite of everything. She knew that. If she didn't know there was no use in going on. Hank was playing to the last trick. "Good work," she said, when she saw that he had made his bid. "That's the rubber. I'm going to put up some coffee."

"When they're small," Dale was saying, "they play their childish games and babble away with their silly prattle. Eenie meenie minie moe, catch a nigger by the toe. Ibbity bibbity sam, and here we go looby loo. But they grow out of it. They get tall and wise and they go to college and wonder how they could ever have uttered those peculiar sounds. Don't they?"

"What's so strange about that?" Connie demanded. "Naturally they grow out of it. You wouldn't expect them to go on talking that way."

"No," Dale said. "No. Naturally. They're college boys now, the intellectual back-bone of the country. So they sit in the rain in a stadium and shout, *Brecka co ex co ex co ex, wallacker wallacker wax*. A great stride forward. *Yip yah es, yip yah es, Siwash, Siwash, yes, yes, yes!* Progress, progress. In Artichokia you can get your Doctor's degree by writing a thesis in baby-talk."

Martha came in and motioned for them to be quiet. "He's crying," she said. "He's sobbing as if his heart would break."

Hank nodded. "I can hear him. It's nothing. Bad dreams. My aunt in Rhodora had nine of them. There was always one crying. It's good for them. Strengthens their lungs."

"He never cries," Martha said, worried. "We sit here night after night and there's never a sound out of him. Something's wrong."

The others took it lightly. "Gas," Dale said. "He'll grow up to be a dramatic critic."

"You have to be firm with them," Connie said. "Threaten him. Tell him if he doesn't stop you'll read Dale's third act to him."

Martha could feel the throbbing of her head. Tragedy was staring them in the face and they refused to recognize it. The idiots. Couldn't they see? Did they have to sit around and spend the rest of their lives being funny? Even Connie. Martha turned to her sharply. "There's something wrong. It sounds like—like choking. Oh, God. I wish they'd come home."

"Good Lord," Connie said. "Do you go through this

every night? What do you do, sit there with your ears against the wall and worry? He's always all right in the morning, isn't he?"

Martha kept opening and closing her hands. It wasn't always like this. The noises were different, disquieting, and he was making strange sounds in his throat, as if he might be suffocating. He was too small, too helpless, to be left alone. Then, suddenly, the baby was quiet. Martha's heart seemed to stop at the same moment. Now it was more frightening than before, and she found herself hoping, praying, that he would cry again. Please, God, just a little sound, to let me know that he is still alive. But there was nothing, not even the beat of a heart to break the terrifying stillness. She went over to Baxter, her face white and tense. "I can't stand it," she said frantically. "Go down and get the superintendent. I have to get in there. Something's happened to that baby."

Baxter got up, glad to be of help, and hurried downstairs. He didn't like the sound of the baby crying either. It reminded him of cries heard long ago. It's a boy, his father had said. Another boy, and he'd been vaguely jealous. Something to share his mother's love, and he'd hoped it would die, and then after howling steadily day and night for almost a week it did die, and he'd felt very wicked for a while, but righteously so. It was *his* home. *His* mother. The new baby had no rights there. And after a while the wicked feeling wore off, because after you get what you want you don't feel so upset about it. It's only when you fail that remorse sets in. His parents must have respected whatever powers he had, because they never had another baby after that. Mother was his and his alone, and all her affection could be lavished on him.

He didn't care much about this Italian baby, fretting in the next apartment. Not the way Martha felt. Her whole heart went out to him. Some day, if he wished it, perhaps he could make this baby die too, and then Martha would be all his again. He didn't want to share her with anybody. The baby might be dead now. He had become quiet so suddenly, just as his baby brother had so many years ago. He would get the superintendent and they could see. He knocked at the basement door but apparently they weren't home. He tried a few times, a feeling of discouragement coming over him. He never seemed able to complete a task, no matter how small. Now he would have to go back to Martha and tell her that he had failed again.

Martha's face was worn, the years suddenly showing in the lines around her mouth. She sat in the corner, slumped, her body smaller, helpless. A baby becomes part of you. Even some other person's baby. The thought wouldn't leave her. Baby suffocates in crib. She'd seen it too often in the papers. And tomorrow they would have another item like that, and then her heart would be broken and she might as well not go on living.

Hank went over to her and put his hand on her shoulder. "Take it easy," he said. "He's quiet now. He must be all right. They howl if anything's wrong."

"He's dead," she said, feeling a pain go down through her chest. "We sat here and let him die."

Hank got up and went over to the window. "The fire-escape connect with their apartment?"

Martha looked up in new hope. "If the window isn't locked."

Hank climbed out. "It's locked," he called. There was another window, about four feet away. "That one's open,"

he said. "I think I can reach it." He climbed over the rail of the fire-escape. It wasn't going to be easy. And they were five stories above the street. He grasped the rail with his left hand and stretched with his right. He might be able to make it. Once he decided, though, he had to go through with it, because his body would be thrown forward toward the open window and he could never get back to the fire-escape. Then it would be the window or the street.

The others crowded at Martha's window, nervous and anxious. Connie could feel a catch in her heart. Don't, Hank, she kept thinking. This is ridiculous. Don't do it, Hank. If he fell! She could imagine his body hurtling through space, and the thought came that she would plunge after him. But he wouldn't slip. He was strong, strong and sure.

He reached the sill with his fingers, then had to let the weight of his body shift. It was all so insane. It would have been easier to smash the door down, or break the other window. Fine time to be thinking of that. He was half-way between the windows, at a point where it would be safer to go ahead than to turn back. He let himself go, clutching the sill with an iron grip. His legs were dangling now, but he got his other arm over and then for the first time he felt safe. He pushed the window open a bit with his shoulder, and pulled himself up with a sigh of relief. Now he let his gaze turn down toward the street, and he realized that he was in a cold sweat. It was a crazy thing to do. But you couldn't leave Martha there, tearing at her heart.

He found a light switch and turned it on. The baby was in the next room. Hank tiptoed in. There he was, sound asleep, breathing easily. Hank hurried to the outside door

and opened it. Martha looked at him, excited, expectant. "He's fine," Hank whispered. She followed him into the Crossi apartment, and stood before the baby's crib for a long time, biting her lips to hold back the tears. There was a faint unpleasant odor in the room. "Gas," Hank said. "Babies are full of it. As soon as they get rid of it they go back to sleep."

They closed the door and returned to Martha's rooms. Gas. That was all. Except that Hank had risked his life to find out. No, it wasn't that. He had done it to save another life. Because after all Petie might have been suffocating. There was no way of knowing unless you saw for yourself.

"Well," Dale said. "Now that the excitement's over, how about some bridge?"

Martha sat there, shaking as if she were crying, her face white as a sheet. Then he was all right. Just a bit of gas. Oh, God. But it might have been almost anything, one of the many things babies get, burst appendices, or strangulated intestines, or the other things she'd been reading about. She'd take care of her own baby, no matter what anybody said. Let them tell her not to fuss with a crying baby, to let him cry, strengthen his lungs. Sure, and the next morning you find the baby beyond all hope, but you have your righteousness, and try putting your arms around that. She'd hover over him, caring for him, loving him, having the doctor every time he let out a peep; she'd wash her hands before she touched him, and boil his toys to get rid of the germs, and the neighbors would say she was spoiling the kid, but to hell with the neighbors, this was going to be her baby and she'd take care of him any way she damned pleased.

"Well?" Dale said.

"What?" Martha stared at him blankly.

"I said, shall we play again? Bridge."

"Oh." Why not? It was a release. You get your mind away from the problems of today and of the future, transferring your attention to the trifles of an unreal world. "Sure," she said, feeling that it must be another person talking. "It's the first time I ever won from you hounds." She passed her hand across her forehead, wondering if she was going to be hysterical. "You get the coffee ready, Bax." She glanced at the score. "I'm all mixed up. We finished that rubber, didn't we?" She sat down, feeling as if her body was being held together by taut threads ready to snap. She took a long breath. "Who deals?" she said, weakly.

CHAPTER 9

THERE are no two ways about it. If you are a great success the world will bow in reverent homage at your feet. Fail, and you are shunned, scorned, or, worst of all, pitied. And the yardstick to determine your achievement? Why, your bankroll, stupid, not your innate ability or whatever good works you may have accomplished in your limited life-time.

Dale was bitter. One of his plays (yes, and it *was* good) was going the rounds, and the other was reposing soporifically in old Horse Harkover's desk. When you've finished a play you should have a potential asset. It may, some day, be produced. It might run for seven years and make millions. The movies could buy it. Somebody might condense it and put it on the air. All sorts of things could happen. At that rate there must be billions in hidden assets, assets of hope, floating around the United States. Everybody writes plays, every man, woman and child who can dig up a second-hand typewriter and a few sheets of blank paper. Then what did he have that the others did not? They all belonged to the same club, the great army of the unproduced, the poor but diligent slobs who still hoped that their little offering would some day see the light of day.

If his great-aunt in Artichokia had died and left him a million dollars he would doubtless be called successful. That was all he needed. A doting and unscrupulous female

who had swindled the natives until she was honored and respected throughout the land. That was the road to fame. A fistful of Artichokian bonds, rather than a batch of hopeful plays. They wouldn't smirk at him then, these self-satisfied sycophantic workers who cringed before the mighty god of a weekly pay-envelope. He would be a finer man, a better man, a man worthy of their gilt-edged encomiums, only because his name would mingle with other important names in the lists of the income-tax payers.

Not that he wanted it, even if such a person had existed. If money were really so important, overshadowing all else, he could return to his uncle's office. A nice, safe, steady, thirty-five dollars a week, and if he didn't watch the clock and the stenographers' silk blouses he might be floating dizzily in the upper brackets at forty dollars, even fifty, after twenty years of diligent service. There was no limit to the advancement you could make in industry, if you had the right uncles. But it wasn't for Edwin, boys, take back your gold, we have principles around here and we do things our way or not at all.

He couldn't work. He was in one of those low moods that kept him from putting silly little words down on paper. There was no use trying. When he couldn't work, he couldn't, and that was all there was to it. It wasn't like digging a ditch, where you could swing your pick and shovel a certain number of times and then dry the sweat from your forehead and go home. That was a definite task. Writing was different, vague, difficult, sometimes impossible. Today was a bad day. He got up and stretched. He might as well drop in at Obie's office. Maybe there was news of some sort. Or perhaps Betty Lou would be visiting. She seemed to spend a lot of her spare time there. She was still unfinished business, with her air of pretended

innocence and her round little shape pushing at her thin dress. Time would tell, and he had plenty of that. Meanwhile he might induce Obie to call Harkover again, and put a bit of pressure on him. Do something, anything, only get him to read the damned play. Then if he said it stank, as he probably would, at least you would know where you stood.

Fortunately Obie was in. He glanced up at Dale, casually. "Oh," he said, "glad you dropped in. I was talking to Hollywood. You remember Marty Davis? He handles my stuff out there."

"Sure. Davis." The excitement was starting inside of him again. "What did he say?"

"Somebody's been boosting you all over Hollywood. A Mrs. Duffle-bag. She thinks you're the nuts. Do you know a Mrs. Duffle-bag?"

"Duffle-bag. Duffle-bag." He shook his head. "Sorry. It sounds like Duffle-bag."

"She saw your one-act play."

"God help her."

"She liked it. She was crazy about it."

"Not *the* Mrs. Duffle-bag, the most intelligent, the most charming, the most discriminating woman in America? Good old Duffy. So she liked my play."

"She's only rushing about Hollywood telling everybody how wonderful it is."

Dale shrugged. "So what? I do it here, and what does it get me?"

"You." Obie couldn't hide his scorn. "She's merely sister-in-law of one of the big shots over at Planet Pictures, and it seems her late husband left her about forty percent of the Planet stock. And *she* liked your one-act play."

"You're sure her name was Duffle-bag?"

Obie moved impatiently. "Sure." He rummaged through the mess of papers on his desk. "I jotted it down. Here. Mrs. Gertrude Duffingham, largest minority stockholder of Planet Pictures."

"Gertie!" Dale exclaimed. "Gertie Duffingham." He looked at Obie ruefully. "You said Duffle-bag."

"Sure. Duffingham. Duffle-bag. What difference does it make?"

"We had a lot of fun together. Good old Gertie. I never knew she practically owned Planet Pictures." He let his glance drift toward the ceiling, dreamily. "So she liked my one-act play!"

"Liked it? She's practically hysterical. Davis told me to rush it out to him. It's funny. I never even bothered to send it to him before. I didn't want to ruin your reputation for your other plays."

Dale shook his head sadly. "It's no use. They can't use it. A bit of social consciousness propped up against an El pillar. What can they make of it? A mystery? A Civil War story? A Mickey Mouse?"

"You don't know them. I almost sold them Dun and Bradstreets last week. They thought it was the Book-of-the-Month. Maybe something in Prelude to Nothing will catch their fancy. God knows what."

"The limping lady," Dale said, brightly. "Maybe they need a special part for a broken-down star. You can't tell."

"We'll have to wait and see. Keep our fingers crossed. And pray. I hope your Duffle-bag friend keeps up the good work." He fingered some of the manuscripts and held one out to Dale. "Oh. Connie's poems. I'm trying to get some publisher interested. Good collection. Two refusals, so far, but nice letters."

"Nobody reads poetry." Dale shook his head. "I haven't even read them myself. I suppose I ought to, some day."

Obie tossed the sheaf of papers to him. "Help yourself. I have some calls to make."

Dale took the manuscript over to a corner of the office and sat down and glanced at it. Sonnets at Sunset. By Constance Gwynn Rawlings. After he'd made his reputation she could use her married name. Connie Edwin. More pep to that, anyhow. She could liven up the title, too. Make it more modern, to attract consumer attention. Swing Sonnets, or something like that. But of course it wouldn't matter. Nobody would read them anyhow.

The Western Union boy sauntered in and dropped a telegram on the desk. Obie glanced at the envelope, then turned to some other matters. Why didn't he open it? What can you learn by looking at the outside? Maybe something was going to happen at last. Planet Pictures. They were begging for the play, demanding it. He could see his name on the screen. Prelude to Nothing, by Dale Edwin. And meanwhile Obie sat there as if he had more important things to do. Dale couldn't stand it. "Open it," he said, impatiently. "The telegram. What are you waiting for?"

"Hey?" Obie looked up in surprise. "Oh. The telegram. I stopped getting excited about telegrams long ago. Somebody is always in a terrific hurry about something, and you rush it to him and sit back and wait twelve years." He held the opened message before him, glanced at the signature, then sat up, suddenly. "Holy Moses! Marty Davis again. Listen." He read excitedly. "What's happening? Now it's R.K.O. Town is shaking with rumors. Rush any Edwin plays, books, stories, jokes. Is Harkover

producing Edwin play? Tell me everything. I'm over sixteen. Davis."

Dale was standing beside him as he finished, his face flushed. "Read it again. Slowly, with feeling." He slapped Obie across the shoulder. "We're starting. Boy, we're on our way. We'll tear the town apart. Wire Davis. Do something. How do you send a telegram?"

"I'll phone it in. What shall I say? How much do we want? He has one of your plays. What's the name of it? That so-called comedy. Maybe we can sell that."

"What could we get for it? Five hundred bucks? A thousand?"

"Five hundred bucks? They'll pay that for an old joke. We'll try fifty thousand and see what happens."

"Are you crazy? Don't be foolish about it. Obie. They'll throw us out on our ears. I'd be glad to get a thousand, just to get started. Even five hundred. Don't spoil things by being too greedy."

Obie patted his shoulder gently, as if he were soothing a bewildered child. "Be calm, son. You're not selling a Cowboy Waffles story to a pulp. This is the motion picture industry. When they want something they pay. And pay big. You *might* get fifty thousand. It's happened. You couldn't possibly get five hundred. They never heard of that amount. And don't forget your dear friend Mrs. Duffle-bag. R.K.O. bidding against Planet. What a set-up. I'll wire Davis to go after them hot and heavy. I wonder where in hell they got that rumor about Harkover. I haven't had a peep out of him."

"Oh," Dale said, smiling in complete self-satisfaction, "If I waited for my agent to start rumors going I'd have long white whiskers. I've been telling people that for months. Gertie, and a hundred other Gerties. It was

bound to get around. Now it's reached Hollywood. Did you ever hear of the calends of April?"

"The what?"

"The calends of April. I made it up. It could be the calends of June, or November. Give me a month and a few hundred dollars and I'd have this country calend-conscious. Although what good it would do is beyond me. Publicity, grandpa. Tell people about yourself. After a while they stop me on the street and say, you know, young fellow, this guy Edwin is good. Those things spread. Swell head, hey? But it did get to Hollywood. That's hot. A rumor that Harkover is producing my play. Next there'll be a rumor that he's taking a bath."

"We'll start with fifty, and take thirty in a hurry. Lowest figure, twenty. How's that? Twenty thousand dollars. Can you imagine all that money? And don't think it's your whoosis of April. Marty Davis can do more by sleeping around than all the publicity you'll ever dig up. Maybe he's met your Gertie too." Obie picked up the phone and gave Western Union the message. Then he turned to Dale. "Now all we have to do is pray. We're through. It's up to Davis."

Dale shook his head in disbelief. "Boy oh boy. I can't stand it. Do you think I ought to wait here? How long might it take? Call me as soon as you hear anything. Anything. Even a weather report. Thirty thousand bucks!"

"Don't get hysterical. You're a long ways from depositing it. They do things in a funny way. Things die all of a sudden out there. But R.K.O. and Planet!" He ran his inevitable handkerchief across his brow. "I have work to do. This will take days. Weeks. I'm not going to have you cluttering up the office while we wait."

Dale started for the door. "For God's sakes, let me know if anything happens. If you can't get me, call Connie at the office." His face was flushed with excitement. "I hope you don't expect me to do any work. Not till this thing is settled. Thirty thousand bucks! I still don't believe it." He shook his head, and kept shaking it as he waited for the elevator in the hall.

Of course, it was a long way from being in the bag. But hope! It had never hit you like this. The best you'd had so far was a check from a pulp. And even that lifted you, helped you go on with your work. He wouldn't go to pieces with money in the bank. No. It would be the incentive he needed for bigger, better, greater things. The sort of work he was capable of. You can't do your best worrying about the rent, or fretting about the finances of your little household. No. Your mind must be free, and clear, and easy. Then you can go to town. Come on, you Planet. It was a relatively new company, one of these young progressive outfits that was going to go places. Well, they might as well start with Edwin. They could do a great deal worse, and pay lots more for it, too. What's thirty thousand dollars to a movie company? One month's salary for one of the owner's cousins. Pooh. They probably let the office boy sign those small checks.

He waited until the afternoon before he phoned Obie again. No use rushing things. "Oh," Obie said. "Nothing much. Another wire from Davis. They're going over the comedy. But they won't do anything until they get the one-act play. That's what they really want to read."

"God," Dale said. "Do they have to do that?"

"They don't, usually. It seems that one of the executives can read. Tough break."

"Which one does Davis sleep with? The executive? His wife? His mistress? I want to get this straight."

"He uses his own judgment. He does all right. I'll let you know if anything breaks. Keep your shirt on."

Then that was all for the moment. What can you do if there isn't any news? You're three thousand miles away from the nerve center, and your fate is being decided by several ridiculous and irrelevant factors, but you can't quite figure the thing out. If your plays are good they ought to buy them. What other angles are there? But apparently you have to have the right fellow work on the proper party, and say the correct thing at the precise moment, and then sit back and pray. It was wrong. They work you up to fever pitch, and then they start letting time slip by. A week. Yes, it didn't seem possible that you could wait that long, but there it was, seven whole days, each made longer by the anxiety that stretched the minutes and made the hours unbearable.

A whole week. "I don't like it," Obie said. "They've had the one-act play a few days now. They've gone cold on us."

Dale picked up some papers from Obie's desk and slammed them down in his annoyance. "Keep after Davis. Don't let him fall down on the job."

"Don't you worry about Davis. He knows his stuff. He can't help delays. That's the way the movies work. Hot today and dead tomorrow. We'll just have to wait."

Dale shook his head, angry. "Wait. What in hell *have* we been doing? Fiddling while the fire went out. They can't let us down like that. We have to do something."

"Do something." Obie's voice was bitter in its sarcasm. "Go ahead, brilliance. You name it and I'll try it."

Dale walked around the office, lifting and dropping his hands as if in agony. "Gamble," he said, suddenly, turning to Obie. "Gamble. The works. All or nothing. What do you say?"

"Why not? Everything around here is a gamble. Even living. What's on your mind?"

Dale sat down and scribbled hastily on a scrap of paper. "A wire to your stuffed friend. I'll send a personal one to Gertie. Listen. *Harkover putting on Edwin play with Garbo, Hepburn, Gable, in person. Planet can get Edwin comedy and one-act play for twenty thousand. Last chance. Next week price goes up. And plenty. Signed, Smythe.* How does that hit you?"

"One of us is crazy," Obie said. "I don't mind playing a thing up, but that's out-and-out lying."

"Oh, all right," Dale said, relenting. "Leave out Garbo, if your conscience bothers you. Anyhow, how do you know Harkover isn't going to do it? He hasn't said so, has he? Maybe he will. We'll call him up one of these days and find out. Wait. Add something about R.K.O. wanting it. That'll get Gertie hot and bothered. Good old Gertie. She bothers easily. The moon was full that night, and in the distance you could hear the soft tinkling of guitars. I was always a sucker for a woman with a minority interest. Well, come on. What can you lose?"

"Only my reputation, and the best contact man on the coast. What's that to you?" He thought for a moment, scratching his head. "Oh, what the hell. We live by the sword, and by the sword we perish." He picked up the phone and dialed the operator. "Western Union," he said, hunching his shoulders as if to ward off a blow.

There was no word the next day, and none the day after that. Davis should have acknowledged the wire. He should have done something. Not left you dangling in mid-air, with twenty grand just out of the reach of your arm. It's too much for the soul to bear. Better be back at your

typewriter, pounding out a Cowboy Waffles story for the Western pulps. Fifteen bucks, twenty bucks, but at least you could eat your breakfast in peace, and then put in a few good hours of work instead of hanging around Obie's place from morning till night.

"This is the twelfth successive day I've haunted this office," Dale said. "Every day that manuscript of Connie's has been staring me in the face, and I haven't read a single damned poem through."

"Well, read them," Obie said, impatiently. "It's the least you could do. The kid's written some good stuff. I suppose you're too high and mighty to bother with poetry."

"I'll try," Dale said. "It doesn't go down easily. Every time I try to read, something exciting starts popping around here." He took the manuscript and sat in the chair in the corner. No sooner had he turned the pages than the inevitable telegraph boy stepped through the door. Dale watched him drop the envelope on the desk and saunter out. This was it. You don't have to open a wire to know. There are electric currents vibrating through the air, and that's what hits your knees and makes them shake. Obie knew it too. He held the wire in his hand, unopened, his eyes meeting Dale's. Dale got up and came over. "It's it," he said, his voice trembling. "I can tell."

It was it. 'PLANET BOUGHT THEM. TWENTY GRAND. PAPERS SIGNED. LETTER FOLLOWS. LOVE. DAVIS.'

CHAPTER 10

TWENTY thousand dollars. Twenty thousand dollars. You might expect to wake up the next day and find it all a lovely dream, but it was real. There was Davis's wire, and later a long distance call. Everything had clicked, Mrs. Duffingham almost passing out when she heard that R.K.O. was after the play, and then they came across an old reader's report on the comedy, praising it all over the place, and there were the bits of gossip in the Hollywood cafeterias, distorted, exaggerated, ridiculous, and then Obie's wire. And still everything had hinged on the one-act play. Gertrude had seen that, and she knew what she wanted. Twenty thousand dollars. Papers signed, Davis said. Nobody knew exactly how it had all happened, but at the proper moment somebody who mattered had said Yes, and the echoes of a hundred yes-men probably thundered up and down the Planet corridors.

There was one thing about good fortune. You could sit back with it, smug, happy, content, holding it until you are ready to disseminate it, listening with a superior smile to the unimportant tales of others, meanwhile bursting with the exciting news that is yours, *yours*. He hadn't told Connie. He hadn't told anybody. There would be time for that when the check arrived. He liked to put things over in a dramatic way. Stun them. Knock them out of their chairs. And another thing. Something might go wrong,

and he couldn't bear to be the victim of a let-down. Of course, the papers were signed, but something might happen, somebody die or change his mind, you never could tell. He didn't know too much about the legal aspects, but he'd heard of too many 'almosts' in the theatrical field. Heart-aches, sure things turning into stark disappointments. He would rather sit with his success, running it through his fingers like a miser's gold until the money was safely deposited to his own account in an unassailable bank. It might take a week or so, but what was a week compared with the happy years to come?

Sometimes it was hard to suppress a smile. One day Connie was bubbling over about her fortunate purchase. "What a break," she said, eagerly. "I wanted one of those tailored blouses, three bucks, and by pay-day they had put it on sale at a dollar ninety-eight. Some sort of competitive price reduction." She held the blouse up proudly, as if to prove that it had really happened.

"That's nice," he said, trying to sound enthusiastic. "Lucky, weren't you?" It was funny. You'd have to get twenty thousand lucky breaks like that, twenty thousand, mind you, before you'd be in a class with Edwin. But he wasn't going to tell her yet. He liked to think about it, sitting back with his eyes closed, dreaming, and no matter how you looked at it you couldn't take the glow out of the picture. He'd be stepping out soon. Get new clothes, and a car. Why not, with money in the bank? Perhaps a new apartment. A place where he could bring people, important people. Gertrude Duffle-bag, and others like that. You have to foster connections of that sort. Be nice to them, son, and don't forget the tinkling guitars in the distance. Twenty thousand dollars!

Of course, there was plenty of time for that. A week, two

weeks, even a month. No use rushing things. At least not until the money was in his hands. And that was a wait of burning excitement. It isn't easy to hang on to a secret like that, your whole being bubbling over with desire and anxiety. He wanted to walk along the streets, shouting it, telling the wide world what had happened. But he had to suppress it, listening attentively to the little stories that made up the lives of ordinary people. Connie saved a dollar on a blouse, and dear brother-in-law Baxter had a job, ten juicy dollars each and every week, and the world was spinning joyfully on its axis, but none of them knew, and the whirling world didn't know, that a check was on its way east, speeding through rain and sleet and gloom of night, to bring new hope, new life, to Dale Edwin, playwright. What were those lines that Betty Lou had swallowed in *Prelude to Nothing*? *We shall go on, always forward, forward*. Yes, a new day was dawning, another day, a better day.

He came home a bit later, on the great day, because he wanted Connie to be there ahead of him. Everything had gone as planned, the check arriving in an ordinary envelope, as if it weren't the most important message in the world, and Obie depositing it in his own bank and then drawing his personal check to Dale's order. A simple, unimpressive slip of paper, pink, of all colors, and suddenly your whole future has assumed its rosy hue. It was worth waiting for, worth suffering for. He tried to be casual as he entered the apartment, and wondered if she could hear the pounding of his heart. "Hello, there," he called to Connie, who was busy with some cans. "Eating in?"

"Hello. Might as well." Sometimes they kissed, and very often it slipped their minds if they were occupied with

other trifling tasks. "Kind of broke this week. That blouse."

That two-dollar blouse. "O.K. with me." He tossed the deposit book carelessly on the table. It was green, and relatively small, and the bank's name was embossed in gold letters, because after all the bank considered itself the important party in the transaction. The depositor didn't count for much. He only furnished the money. But there it was, in simple pen-and-ink lettering, DALE EDWIN, so that anybody who saw the contents could tell that the money belonged to him, not to the gaudy arrogant bank.

"What's that?" Connie asked, scarcely glancing at it.

"Oh, that." He tried to be off-hand. "Deposit book."

"Christmas Club?" She was busy with her can-opener, too busy to give an unimportant bank-book a second glance.

"Open it," he said. "I'm mighty proud of that book. It's the first time I ever owned one. Look at my name on the cover. Pretty impressive, isn't it?"

"They always have nice handwritings. Bank clerks and librarians." She took a quick glance at the outside of the book and dropped it back to the table.

He watched her, amused. "Open it," he repeated.

She turned back the cover. One hundred and eighty—no, it wasn't, it was eighteen thousand. Eighteen thousand dollars! "Dale," she said, frightened. "What is it? It says eighteen thousand dollars. Doesn't it?"

He glanced at the figures critically. "That's right. And no cents."

She smiled in a superior way. "One of those trick things you get in the magic stores? It's not a bad gag. It looks real."

"Doesn't it?" he said, his excitement rising. "It *is* real. It is. *It is!* Good honest American dollars, and eighteen

thousand of them." He could feel his pulses throbbing so that he wondered if he could stand it. "Eighteen thousand dollars! Can you imagine it? Eighteen thousand dollars!"

"Oh, Dale," she said, weakly, "what happened?"

"Planet Pictures. They bought my comedy and one-act play." His voice rose. "Twenty thousand bucks! Can you believe it? Twenty thousand bucks! The check came in this morning. The first thing an agent does is to deduct his commission. Then he congratulates you." His fingers were trembling. "Can you imagine Dale Edwin with eighteen thousand dollars in the bank?"

"Oh, Dale," she said, again. She sat down, a sudden weak feeling coming over her. Then she wanted to get up and kiss him or congratulate him, but her knees were shaking so that she was afraid she couldn't stand.

"Planet was interested in the one-act play," he said, trying to control his voice. "Then R.K.O. got positively violent. They heard rumors that Harkover is going to produce one of my plays. It all worked like a dream. And it's only the beginning. This is the jumping-off place, baby, and there's no telling where we go from here."

She buried her head in her hands, slumped over the kitchen table, and her shoulders shook uncontrollably. "I can't stand it," she said. "It's too much all at once. I can't stand it."

He stood close to her and patted her. "No use crying about it. This is good news. The first we've had in a long while."

"Crying? I'm not crying. I'm laughing." She lifted her face and brushed away the unconscious tears. "Maybe I *am* crying at that," she said, hysterically. Her head was throbbing.

"You don't have to go all to pieces," he said, consolingly.

"Or if you must we might as well do it together. I've been hanging on to this news for over a week. It's been seething through me till I was ready to burst. Now I can tell the whole God-damned world. Dale Edwin has sold his plays! How nice it sounds. I want to roll it around my tongue, and say it over and over. Dale Edwin has sold his plays."

"I can't stand it," she said, again. "I never got good news in one great burst, before. It's more upsetting than misfortune. I don't know how to take it." She got up slowly and came over, close to him, and kissed him. "Good luck, Dale," she said, simply, "for the future. For always." She turned to the table and poured the corn out of her opened can into a pot, then added some milk and stirred it slowly. Eighteen thousand dollars in the bank and she was preparing a simple home-cooked meal for the great playwright, Dale Edwin.

Dale always slept late. There was no particular reason for early rising, bank account or no. Connie never had much for breakfast, only a cup of hot coffee and some Uneeda Biscuits, so that there could be no purpose in getting up to help her. Some days she came back to the bedroom after breakfast and leaned over and kissed him good-bye, and some days she just hurried out without a word. This was one of those days. It was almost ten when he became fully awake, and then he couldn't remember her departure at all. He stepped into his house slippers and slid along, lazily, to the kitchen. Good girl. She had left a small light under the coffee. He went back to the bathroom to wash and to brush his teeth, then poured some coffee for himself. He could have a real breakfast downstairs later, at the cafeteria.

It was almost noon before he reached the street. He was in no mood for work. What the hell. He had money in the bank, and another finished play that would soon be in great demand. If the picture was successful his name would be known to millions throughout the country. Fame. Fame. It was sitting in his lap. He was a new person, a different person. He walked along the street, his head higher. How can you keep from puffing up? You can feel all the fine things you want to about your work, but until somebody puts his money on the line your own opinion means nothing. After that things change. They're hard-headed business men in the motion-picture industry, and if they say that your plays are worth twenty thousand dollars, you can bet your last cent that they are. They don't pay for nothing. There are plenty of plays. Thousands of people all over the country writing plays, elevator boys and big executives and farmers' daughters and congressmen, all of them taking fresh clean sheets of paper and starting, *Act I, Scene I*. How many of them succeed? Three, one, none, out of the many thousands. Then he had *that* on all of them, didn't he? All of them, all writing plays, and his stood out. There were no two ways about that.

A passing acquaintance lifted his finger in friendly recognition. "Hi, Edwin," he called. "How're you hitting 'em?"

"Hello, there." Dale waved a hand in greeting before the fellow's name came to mind. Harvey. No, Hartley. Hartley. Worked in the publicity department of one of the big movie firms. A poor struggling son-of-a-bitch who wouldn't make sixty dollars a week the best days he ever saw. Sixty dollars a week! Once that was a fortune. How values change. Now it was trifling, insignificant. Sixty dollars for a whole week's work. Three weeks to

earn a hundred and eighty, thirty weeks for eighteen hundred, three hundred weeks before you reach eighteen thousand. Three hundred weeks. That was a lifetime.

He wanted to call this fellow Hartley back. The way he had greeted him, as if he were nobody. How're you hitting 'em? Come here, you dumb-looking clerk, I'll tell you, and tell you plenty. Eighteen thousand bucks in the bank, and lots more where that came from. America's greatest playwright, and soon they would all know. Not that he had changed. He hadn't, the least bit. It was just that people were going to recognize the talent that had always been his. He'd arrived, while Hartley and a million other Hartleys were still grovelling in the dust. Call it luck, call it the breaks, the fact remained that he had something that the others lacked.

He straightened up the least bit, feeling just a little taller, a little more important, than before.

Connie arranged to meet Martha for lunch, bursting with the tremendous news. Martha had no phone at home, and you can't go into the exciting details in an office full of listeners.

"We're rich," she said, even before she was comfortably seated. "Rich. Eighteen thousand dollars in the bank. Can you imagine it? Dale sold two of his plays to the movies. A cold twenty thousand." She adjusted her coat and removed her gloves, and then just sat there and stared.

"You sure seem happy about it," Martha said. "I'd swear you'd lost your last friend."

"Maybe I have." Something was stifling the joy that she knew should be hers. Things were going to be different, and she wasn't sure that she would like the new order.

Last night, for example, Dale had said, We won't stay in this dump much longer. That was only part of it. A dump. You get to know a place, and like it. It becomes part of you, part of your life, and you feel that you want to stay on in surroundings dear to you. But she wasn't going to complain. This was supposed to be a joyous occasion, and perhaps they would have cocktails, to celebrate. She tried to pull herself together. "I have to adjust myself," she said. "It's all so sudden. He never mentioned it to me. Wanted it to be a surprise. Sweet, wasn't it? He just tossed the bank-book in front of me as if it had a new two-dollar deposit. I wasn't even going to look at it."

"Last night?"

She nodded. "I never suspected a thing. Honestly, my heart was beating so I thought it would burst."

Martha leaned forward, beginning to share the excitement. "Did he get you anything?"

"Get me anything?"

"I'm sorry." Martha found sudden absorption in the menu. "What do you eat? The luncheon, or something *à la carte*?" She could feel her cheeks burning.

"Dale doesn't do things like that," Connie explained, earnestly. "He's not the tender type. Don't think I'm complaining. That's the way he is." She studied the menu with exaggerated care. "Not like Baxter," she said, unexpectedly. "He was always sweet."

"It's funny," Martha said. "We're a long ways from sitting on top of the world, but Saturday he brought home nine dollars and a pair of stockings. Strange how those things touch you."

They sat silently for a moment. "There's too much on the lunch," Connie said. "I'll just have a sandwich." Of

course Martha had been married a long time, and they had been through so much together. Perhaps she and Dale would have fused into a perfect union if they had gone through the fire of hardship and despair. This sort of changed things. They wouldn't struggle now. They were living in a dump, and they could throw their furniture away and move to a new and glamorous place. Everything was different now, and their new wealth would certainly not bring them closer. The sudden realization of that came over her as she thought of Baxter and the pair of stockings. She was married to a stranger. There was no getting away from that. They had nothing for each other, nothing. She shared an apartment with a man and he put his arms around her and caressed her, and they slept in the same bed, and she didn't even know him. Never, since their marriage, had she had a feeling as intimate as the one that evening on the East River docks. Something inside of her went out to him then. Then, and never since. And now they were going to enter a new phase, and things were not going to be better. They were made for struggle, not for luxury, and you couldn't help wondering about the future. He might have brought her a present. It would have made her a lot happier, but of course he wasn't thinking about her happiness.

They ordered their sandwiches. "What's the matter?" Martha asked, when the waitress left. "Has it done anything to you? Left you unhappy?"

Connie looked up quickly. "No. No." She drew designs on the tablecloth with her fork. "Dale has his faults, but they're things I accept." She laughed, embarrassed. "I've been thinking that writers all over the world should be shot. Every novel, every movie, tells you about love overpowering. I'm beginning to wonder if there is such a

thing. People get along, in a calm sedate way, and they get married, their eyes wide open, and if they remain good friends for a number of years I suppose that is about the most you can expect. For every Héloïse and Abelard there must be a million couples who live and die without divorce, getting along, tolerating each other. People who never felt anything deep or moving." She sighed and shook her head. "Perhaps we get to expect too much."

Martha leaned toward her. "Then there *is* something wrong."

"Not really. You mentioned Dale's bringing a gift. He doesn't do that sort of thing. Sometimes you feel you'd like some sign of affection that wasn't purely physical."

"You said you didn't expect anything." Martha's lips were set. "Good God, do you have to pick this moment to get vague desires? For the first time in your life you'll know what it means to have money. It can smooth over a lot of annoying bumps. You'll find that out. Just wait around a while."

"I've never cared for material things. I want a smile, or a ten-cent trinket. I'd like to have a door held open for me, just once."

"Dale doesn't hold doors. That's bad. Bad." Martha shook her head in mock dismay. "They'll give you a divorce for that in forty-one states."

"It's symbolic. I'd rather get a good beating, and a bit of tenderness afterwards. If I'm married to a man I want to be able to let him know that I have a stomachache, or a run in my stocking. Look. For weeks now I've been dying to tell him about my collection of poetry. It means something to me. Maybe not to the world, but to me. I want it to be important to him, too. But I can't even mention it. There's always something of his own that comes

first, like what Harkover's secretary said four years ago, or how his horse would have won if it hadn't stopped for tea. And I wait for a chance, and it doesn't come. And now this tremendous thing hits us, the biggest thing in his life, and my poor little book might just as well crawl under the couch and die there, because he'll never deign to notice it, never."

"It's your own fault. Just tell him. You probably had a thousand opportunities."

"Maybe. I didn't want a thousand. I wanted one." The waitress set their sandwiches and coffee before them, and they ate in silence. She was sorry about the things she had said. This was supposed to be a meal of triumph, of happiness. Maybe conditions weren't as perfect as she would like them to be, maybe love itself wasn't all that people pretended, but at the moment she was sitting on top of the world, rich, important, happy. If she wasn't happy it was nobody's fault but her own.

Dale strolled along, a gentleman of leisure, glancing into shop windows and wondering where to start the spree of spending that he knew was inevitable. This wasn't a once-in-a-lifetime event with him. He was off now, and other successes would follow. The first was always the hardest, and after that you were made. Harkover would do his play, now that he had a reputation, and then the movies would bid real money for it, fifty or sixty thousand dollars, and he could do that, over and over again, year after year. He had to smile. There was a Cowboy Waffles story somewhere in the mail, and ordinarily he would be waiting eagerly for his twenty-dollar check.

How different from a week ago. The gas man was here, dear. A dollar sixty. No, I didn't happen to have it on

me. Yes. And the tailor, and the milkman. They all seemed to drop in during the day, when he was home. Home, and broke. He wouldn't let Connie leave money with him. He wasn't going to be a damned housekeeper, paying his way by cleaning the dishes and fussing with the tradesmen. Maybe you don't know it, dear, but I'm a playwright. Well, they'd know it now. More than a playwright. *The* playwright. Others had said so, and he was going to prove that they were right.

That was a nice car. Buick sedan. Sixteen hundred dollars. Not so much. He'd always wanted a car. He stood before the window for a long time, then went on. He'd get one all right, but he wasn't sure that he wanted a Buick. The Cadillacs were more showy, more dashing.

He was itching to make his first purchase. Something he could pay for by check. O.K., he could say to the storekeeper, get it certified if you don't think it's good. There's plenty more where that came from. Plenty. He wouldn't number the check "One." It would be Seventy-one, or a Thousand and One. Something to show that he was an old experienced check-drawer. Perhaps later he could get the bank to print his name on the checks. That would look important. DALE EDWIN, PLAYWRIGHT. No. Just DALE EDWIN. By that time people would know who he was.

You could do things with money in the bank. Get around a bit. Live. He was young and full of life. He didn't have to be tied down. Not that his marriage did that. There had been other limitations, most of them financial. Now that was over. It was almost more than he could bear. Why, he was somebody now, a person of importance. And he hadn't changed. Some young fellows would go all to pieces when hit by unexpected good for-

tune. Not Dale Edwin. He was what he had always been, a playwright of talent, and now he was beginning to receive a small part of his just desserts.

He stopped before a jewelry store on Forty-third Street. They had unusual things in the window. He ought to stop in and strike up an acquaintance with the proprietor. Girls fall for things of that type, and you could never tell. He might develop into a real good customer. First he would buy something for Connie. Later, if things went nicely, a little present for Betty Lou. He shook his head, overcome by the new world spread before him. "Thank you, Gertie Duffle-bag," he said, fervently. "Thanks—for everything."

CHAPTER II

HANK and Baxter sat near the front of the store, looking out at the fading day. Hank reached up lazily and pulled the light cord. "If another customer comes in," he said, "it'll make a grand total of one. We might just as well close evenings. We're out of the residential district. Nobody comes in after business hours. Strikingly similar, I might say, to the balance of the day. If you know what I mean."

Baxter got up and stretched, like an old man. He walked toward the cash register, shaking the stiffness out of his legs, and glanced at the total. "Forty-two seventy," he said. "That's not so bad, is it, for a week day?"

"Not bad. Not good. We can get by. Maybe I hope for too much. Millions. Why don't you sell a yacht to somebody?"

Baxter looked at him anxiously. "I haven't brought you bad luck, have I, Hank? I used to make a habit of it. I've been sort of hoping I got over that."

"Bad luck? You're a spark plug around here. Honestly. Things have really perked up a bit since you came."

"Have they? Maybe I'm snapping out of it. Haven't seen old Whiskers for a good while. Do you think I might have licked my pet jinx?"

"Look, Bax, I told you I don't believe in that stuff."

"Neither did I." Baxter shook his head. "Too many

things happened to me, all at once. I had to get an answer, so I picked on Whiskers. I don't know. I've lost something. Maybe I've taken too many beatings, like a fighter. What do they call that?"

"Slap-happy?"

"I guess so. But I feel different now. I don't shake when somebody comes into the store. I think some of my confidence is returning. I can talk to people. They don't frighten me. They're human beings, just like myself."

"You handle them swell," Hank said, carelessly. "Better than I do."

"Do you think so?" Baxter's voice rose in its eagerness. "Really, better than you? I know I'm getting along all right, but I didn't think I was that good. I'm glad you think so. I feel I'm on my way back. I went through something these last years. Two of my bosses committing suicide. One would be bad enough. But two! Boy. That hit me. One of them had been acting queerly for a good while, and then I walked into the office one bright and sunny morning and there he was, hanging. Pretty as you please. God. That takes something out of you." He stared at the floor for a moment. "Sometimes it's worse to go on living. Like old Mr. Evans. He was nice, soft and sweet and kind. He had an importing business, and every day he got older and weaker and poorer. The last few weeks he didn't pay me anything at all. He was just plain broke, and he didn't know what to do about it. What does an old man do? He'd borrowed from every friend he had, and so had his wife, and they were just about through. They couldn't figure what had hit them. I think they'd been rich once. Honestly, I went home nights and cried. Bad enough not getting paid, but Lord, I wasn't supposed to worry about them, was I?"

"What happened to them?"

Baxter spread his hands, hopelessly. "That was a few years ago. They might be dead now. I don't know. They had no telephone, and I went up to visit them once but they'd moved. What happens to people like that?" He shrugged his shoulders. "There's nothing left for them. Just sitting around and waiting for death."

"You've had your share of hard luck. I suppose a lot of us went through the same sort of thing. Those were tough years."

"Don't I know. I'm supposed to be a lawyer. They said I was pretty good, too. Now I'm forty-five. I should be at my peak. Look at me. Something's slipped. It doesn't come easily any more. I serve summonses for a couple of fellows I knew at college. That's what's left of my legal career. Don't tell *me* about jinxes."

"Your pal with the whiskers was working overtime. You're not the only one he hit. I studied engineering and wound up playing pro basketball. Hell. That wasn't so bad. You have to forget some things if you want to eat. I don't know. Maybe we attach too much importance to eating. We ought to try starving and see if it's as bad as we expect."

Baxter straightened a few unimportant things around the counter. "I want the place to look especially nice, when Martha comes. I wonder if we could inveigle some customers in while she's here. I'd like her to see how nicely I handle them." He stood erect, in his best selling manner. "I *do* do it all right, don't I?"

"Sure," Hank said. "You're natural with people. That's what I like. I've never yet sold a bicycle to a man who came in to buy a pipe. This salesmanship is the bunk. I always believed in selling a customer approximately what

he wants." He thought for a moment. "Maybe that's why I'm such a terrific success. I don't know. That's the way I am."

"What time is it?"

Hank glanced at his watch. "Twenty to six."

"She'll be here any minute. Eating with us?"

Hank thought for a moment. "Let's eat in. My treat. We'll get some franks and beans."

"Say, that's swell. Martha'll be tickled. She likes you. I guess everybody does."

"Sure," Hank said. "I'm a glamour boy. I was voted the college mug."

"I'll call the del." He peered at Hank's face. "You must have changed. You're not so bad now."

"Thanks." Hank grinned. "Get some coffee too. And pie. See what kind he has."

Baxter dialed the number. "Hello, Gus, what have you got for three hungry guys? Franks and beans? Good. Boston cream pie?" He looked to Hank. "O.K. Three coffees. Get it right over, will you, Gus? Don't forget the mustard."

"Boston cream pie," Hank repeated, as Baxter hung up. "We aren't boycotting Boston for anything, are we?"

"Boston. Boston. No, I don't think so. Anyhow, the pie doesn't actually come from Boston. It's just a name."

"Is that so?" Hank looked crestfallen. "I thought for a moment I was being funny. The way we always jump in and boycott something as soon as we're angry at somebody. We don't bother to find out if we're helping or hurting people. Turkish baths or German measles, it doesn't matter, give them up and you're doing your bit for something or other."

"If you hate a country," Baxter explained patiently, "you don't buy its merchandise. That's simple."

"What do you hate? Its colors on the map? The people are all right. They can't help the direction in which they're being led. Starve them with your boycotts. The fellows at the top don't suffer. They eat."

Baxter got up and went to the door. "Here she comes," he called. "I can spot that walk a block away."

Hank stood next to him, and they bowed politely as she approached. Just behind her came the boy from the delicatessen, his arms loaded with packages. "Just in time," Hank said. "We're eating in. I have a nice table in the rear."

"Oh," she said, pleased. "I'd love that. We never know what to do evenings." She looked around admiringly. "I didn't expect such a large place. You're lucky you have an assistant."

"I sure am."

She looked straight at Hank. "Sure, *you're* lucky, all right."

Baxter went to the back and busied himself with the food, arranging the things on the table. Martha sat up near the front of the store with Hank. "That's swell of you," Martha said. "I suppose that's the difference. Doing nice things or not doing them. Dale probably would have taken us out for a meal, if somebody had suggested it. With fancy trimmings. He didn't think of it himself. That's the way he is."

"What happened? Is he celebrating something?"

She looked at him in surprise. "Don't tell me you don't know. Didn't Bax tell you? Dale sold two of his plays to the movies for twenty thousand dollars. Good Lord! Has my husband more important things to talk about?"

"Never said a word. Maybe he thought it was a secret

or something. Twenty thousand! Ye gods. I never knew there was that much money. I mean for one person to have all for himself. It's great, isn't it? I'm glad, for Connie, anyhow."

"I wonder." Martha paused, scratching her chin. "That won't mean happiness to Connie. I don't know what it will mean. A larger apartment, maybe. New furniture. A car. That's not important to her. She wants something real, something deep. Whatever it is, she's groping for it. Money won't bring it to her."

She put her purse and newspaper down on the counter. Hank spread the paper and glanced at the headlines. "God," he said, "I hate to look at the news these days. Did you ever notice how people rush to buy the papers when they scream calamity? An editor wouldn't dare to put good news on the front page. Nobody would read it."

"How do we know?" Martha said. "There is no good news. It's discouraging. We go on living, quaking, hoping that nothing hits us. It's a great life."

"*You* feel it. Look at me. I'm restless. I want to be in things, be part of them, and I don't know where to start. I've read twelve different versions of conditions today and what caused them, each by an expert who admits that he can't possibly be mistaken. I've come to only one conclusion. The wronger a guy is, the louder he shouts. I'm still trying to find out where I stand."

"It all depends on what you are. Things that are all right to a Communist might seem a little dizzy to a Daughter of the American Revolution."

Hank laughed. "I'm a bewildered liberal. That's the best I can do at the moment. We ought to form a party. There must be millions of us. All we need is a colored shirt. How about you?"

"Me? I'm frustrated womanhood. And don't think *we*

couldn't be a party." She smiled and lifted her head. "I'm all right now, though. You've done more to build me up than all the tonics Lydia Pinkham ever brewed."

"Not Brady." Hank shook his head. "I've become a soap-box crusader. I substitute words for action. That's what happens when a strong silent guy finds he has a voice. He never does stop using it. And frankly, I don't like it. Some day I'm going to stop talking, and go places. Just now I don't know where, or how."

"Don't think I don't appreciate what you've done for us," Martha said, inclining her head toward Baxter. "You don't need an assistant to prepare meals. I know what you're doing." She looked away, embarrassed. "Thanks."

Hank spread his hands, disclaiming credit. "He keeps pretty busy. There's always something in a store. You can't let people wait around, even if they're panhandlers."

Baxter took a step toward them. "Ready," he called. "Come and get it."

They sat around the table, munching the juicy frankfurters and sipping their coffee out of paper cups. "Like camping out," Martha said. "Everything tastes better."

"Good dogs," Baxter said.

She turned to him. "Why didn't you tell Hank about Dale?"

"What about Dale?"

"Well, of course, eighteen thousand bucks is a mere trifle in our lives."

"Say," he said, abashed. "I clean forgot. Didn't I even mention it?" He bit his lips, as if trying to recall. "It's funny. Some things stay with me, and others slip. I keep remembering the older things, things of long ago. I was telling Hank about that Mr. Jenkins in our old law office. I'll never forget the blank expression on his face, the way he went on handing out cigars." He turned to Hank, ex-

plaining. "He'd been telling us about his baby, months before it came. Then it was born dead, and he passed around cigars just the way he'd planned, and some of the fellows didn't know, and they congratulated him."

"I know," Hank said, quietly. "You told me the other day."

"That was twelve years ago," Martha said. "Twelve years."

"I know," Baxter said. "I was just trying to show you that I do remember things."

"I know you do," Martha said. She glanced around the store. "How are you as a salesman?"

Baxter lifted his head proudly. "I do all right. Ask Hank. Don't I?"

"Sure." Hank's tone was reassuring. "I like the way you handle people. Even the tough ones. We get some fine birds around here. Nice upstanding racketeers. Bax talks right up to them, and they like it."

"Yes, sir," he said, expanding. "I can take care of the tough ones."

"O.K.," Martha said. "But don't take your glasses off."

Baxter sat there, looking into space. "This Jenkins," he said, "I was telling you about—"

"Stop it," Martha said, sharply. "I've heard it a hundred times. I'm sick of it."

Baxter looked at her in mild surprise, then turned to Hank. "I just wanted to tell you. It was my fault. I didn't mean it, but every time he started bragging about the fine big boy he was going to have I kept thinking, I bet it'll be born dead. I didn't wish it on him, mind you. It just kept running through my head."

"The jinx," Martha said, patiently. "The jinx. I have jinxes coming out of my ears."

"I can do it," he said, eagerly. "I can whistle up a jinx

just like that. I've done it, lots of times. Just by thinking about things." He chewed the last morsel of bread and sat there quietly, his eyes glued to the darkest corner of the store. The jinx. But he was rid of it now. He was on his way back. He could feel it, something he hadn't felt these last ten years. He was helping Hank, actually helping him run the store. Hank admitted it. After a while he could do the more important work, buying and managing the place generally. It was good to feel like a human being again.

"We should have had more dogs," Hank said. "Six franks isn't much for a hungry crowd."

"I'm stuffed," Martha said. She kept her eyes on Hank. "You don't go in for that jinx business, do you?"

"I don't ridicule it," Hank said, more serious than she expected. "I can understand the way a person feels. Hard luck dogs you so that you begin to think it must be more than coincidence. I used to feel that way, and then I discovered that everybody had a bit of it in the lean years. We make silly promises to ourselves if only certain things will come out the way we want them to. What's that? Offerings to the jinx? It's something like it, anyway." He picked up the cardboard container. "More coffee?"

Martha nodded. "Thanks." She had a heavy feeling around her heart. Baxter had had more than his share of hard luck, but it wasn't only that. He'd dragged down the people he'd worked with, in some strange way that she couldn't understand. Five of them. Six. It starts you wondering. Next time, if it happened, it would be Hank. It was absurd. We don't believe in that stuff. Whiskers rides again. She shook her head, annoyed. She'd always ridiculed Baxter and his crazy hunches. But the feeling was there, and it brought a lump to your throat that the

coffee couldn't wash away. Whiskers rides again. You could almost hear the sound in the distance, like the hoofbeats of Fate, riding madly in the direction of the Brady store . . .

CHAPTER 12

DALE hadn't bought that little present yet. He'd meant to, several times, but you just don't get around to doing things when you have too much time on your hands. It didn't matter. He'd do it soon. One of these days he would have his splurge. Meanwhile he was brushing up old acquaintanceships that had started to rust. Nice girls, some of them, young and pretty and far from unfriendly. No use letting them drift into obscurity, now that he could afford cozy lunches and trifling gifts. These were days, glorious days, days to wander at will, to go where or when one pleased, to work or to visit or to dream lovely dreams. To live. Life could be so beautiful. Things had changed. They were in their new apartment now, and in another week he would have delivery of the latest model car, with all the trimmings, and what difference did it make if he spent three or four or five of his many thousands of dollars? There was plenty left, and even when that vanished there would be no occasion for worry. This was only the beginning. Soon the real money would start rolling in.

Money is an unimportant commodity in the life of an idealist. Those were his own words. Sure, and poverty was no disgrace, but, as the fellow said, it was a damned inconvenience. It's easy to ridicule the need for wealth, but only while it is amazingly remote. Bring it closer, get the feel of it in your fingers and in your blood, and you

begin to wonder about trite epigrams. They always sound all right, just as they did when you copied them in your round even writing in the lower grades at school, but when you grow up you can't help wondering. While you're starving it eases the burden if you feel that you're doing it for an ideal. So you coin phrases, and you repeat them to yourself until you believe them, and then to other people. Strange how an accumulation of funds can swing your emotions around and start them scampering in a different direction. It was nice to be rich. He had touched a tentative tongue to wealth and he liked the taste.

There was a chance that Obie had heard from Harkover by now. It was about time. Obie wasn't pushing things the way he should. Perhaps a few well-chosen words would get him off the seat of his pants, get him up and going, earning his ten percent. He decided to stop in at his office. If nothing else, it was a pleasant way of wasting time.

"Hello," Obie said, gruffly, when he saw who it was. "What do *you* want?"

Dale lifted an admonishing finger. "Easy, m'lad. You're addressing your best meal-ticket. You should show the proper courtesy."

"Big shot." Obie was obviously not in a pleasant mood. "If I knew you were coming I would have worn a clean shirt."

"What's biting you?"

"My best meal-ticket. You're *somebody* now. I'm surprised you lower yourself to talk to me."

"Wait, now. I don't like that. I haven't changed. You ought to know it if anybody does. I don't claim to be any better than I was before. What are you picking on me for?"

"You used to work. What's happened to you? Can't you get your mind off pleasure? I'd like to take it easy too. Don't you think I'd like to run off to the country somewhere and do nothing but lay around in the grass?"

Dale grinned. "Now I don't know whether to criticize your grammar or your morals."

"Don't you worry about my morals. I can take care of myself. Which is more than I can say for a certain swell-headed playwright."

Dale let his hands slide deep into his pockets. "Go ahead. Build it up. I haven't done anything for you. I don't have to stand here and take whatever you dish out. Aren't you getting a bit beyond an agent's bounds? I don't remember just what our agreement says."

Obie glared at him. "You know damned well we have no agreement. What do you want? A new agent? Go ahead. I haven't got you tied."

"Now, wait a minute. Wait. I never said anything like that. I'm just trying to check your duties. I want to see if certain things are included, like those lovely insults. What are you supposed to do for your ten percent?"

"Nothing. Practically nothing. Virtually write your lousy stuff, spend ten of the best years of my life trying to peddle it, then keep you working, keep your spirits up, finance you, argue my heart out with those stinking producers, pull off the greatest coup in history by getting the movies to buy those so-called plays for almost enough dough to pay off the national debt, and then have to hold you together by sheer force to keep you from going to pieces and scattering yourself all over the universe. For all of which I get ten cents out of every dollar you earn. I tell you it's highway robbery."

Dale smiled, indulgently. "Would you go over that

again, slowly? I need a speech like that near the end of Act Two. Percival is pouring his heart out to the striking mine workers. His feelings are hurt. Somebody called him a flower. He says just about what you said, in the same injured way."

Obie spun his chair away from Dale and glared off into space. "Funny. At times you're a riot. The Planet people said your limping lady scene was the best bit of comedy they'd seen in years. I didn't have the heart to tell them that it was supposed to be sad." He grinned, self-satisfied. "Three of the script readers broke down and wept at the funny parts."

"Who in hell cares if they laughed or cried? They get twenty bucks a week for crying. I got twenty thousand dollars."

Obie opened the drawer of his desk and pulled out some papers and spread them before him. "Manuscripts. Slobs like you, hoping for a break. Some of them good, too." He pointed a severe finger at Dale. "Not a signed paper with any one of them. I trust them. I hope they trust me. What in hell do you want, anyhow?"

"You started it. I was merely trying to see whether you had control over my destiny, or just a ten percent interest in my writing. I've been weaned. You don't have to follow me around. I can take care of myself."

"Too damned well, if I'm any judge. All right. I have no right to pry into things that are personal. Not as your agent. Maybe we'll get around to that later, as a friend. Where shall I start?"

"Business before pleasure, old cookie."

"You don't have to go fancy on me. I knew you when. I still have one of your ten-buck westerns in the office. Cowboy Waffles and his good old horse." He drew him-

self up in his seat and patted his hair into place. "Listen. I want you to go to work. Any writer that ever amounted to anything hopped on a break and went to town. You're going to sit back on your laurels. What laurels? What in hell have you ever done? I suppose you think that you'll take another afternoon off some day and spit out another twenty-thousand-dollar play. Let me tell you. I've been around long enough to get hard-boiled. It won't happen. It's like winning a sweepstakes ticket. You can't blow in your fortune, leaving only two and a half dollars for another ticket. It may not work. I'm telling you, and you don't have to copy that down for your Percival either."

"Good going, Smythie. Honestly, I didn't think you had it in you. You're a business man at heart. If I don't produce you don't get your old ten percent. Nice going."

"Listen," Obie said, gruffly. "I'd give you the same advice if you walked out on me today. I don't like to see a talent go to pieces. I've had too many failures. Good, bright boys, but they couldn't get going. You're all right. You have something, but what you've cashed in on isn't your real talent. That was a freak. I'd like to see you do something good if there wasn't a cent in it. Do you believe that?"

Dale nodded. "Sure I do. You're all right. I never had any complaints about you, did I? It's you who's picking me apart. All right. You want me to get back to work." He lifted his right hand. "I do solemnly swear, and so forth and so forth." He walked over to the desk and slapped Obie on the back. "What else?"

"Lay off the cow-punching. I don't want my girl friends asking me how I got the imprint of a hand on my back. And that's what I really want to talk about." He

tugged at his ear, and shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"You got a swell wife, Dale."

"So?"

"I've known the Rawlings girls for years. I used to park on Martha's door-step till she had to call the cops. I want to tell you, there's something fine and deep and sincere about those girls. Connie's like Martha, younger, more spirited, maybe. I don't know if I'm going to tell you or beg you. Don't hurt her, Dale. For God's sake, don't. There are things that mean too much to her, things she won't be able to bear."

"Such as?" Dale's voice was cold.

"You're not fooling me. I know you haven't thrown that little red address book away. And now you have money. You're a big shot. Nice clothes. A fancy apartment. Boy, that goes swell with wavy hair and violet eyes. They can't say no."

"They never protested too strongly," Dale said, complacently. "The money has nothing to do with it. I told you I'm the same person I was before."

"I'm not sure I'd brag about that."

"You know," Dale said, ignoring him, "I walk along the street and I think, this is Dale Edwin, the great playwright, and I wonder if people that pass me realize it. Dale Edwin, with thousands in the bank, and a checking account, and soon his name will be flashed across the screen, *Prelude to Nothing*, from an original play by Dale Edwin, with millions of people all over the country watching, and remembering the name. Maybe some of them next to me, right at my elbow in the movie house, not knowing."

"The same person you were before," Obie said, sarcastically. "Aren't you, though. You're puffed up like a toy

balloon. Great guy. *The Dale* Edwin. New rights now. O.K. Do things your own way, chasing every likely-looking female on Broadway."

"Don't forget the side-streets," Dale said, pleasantly. "New York is a big city."

Obie tapped his fingers nervously on the desk. "Don't think I enjoy this. Bawling out a full-grown man. I don't care a damn about the morals of the thing. I understand human relationships. I've grown up."

"Have you, really? How old are you, anyhow?"

"Never mind," Obie said, shortly. "I voted for President."

"I know." Dale glanced off into space. "Hayes or Tilden?"

"Bright boy. Nice how you can twist a subject around till we wonder what in hell we started discussing. Talk about rumors. I don't know why they come back to me. All more or less the same. Edwin is on the make."

"They must be reading my mind. Now I'll have to apologize for thinking about things."

"Thinking. Edwin, the man of action. Edwin the Great. I don't suppose I'd be stretching things if I said Edwin the Louse. Stop me if I'm wrong."

"Difference of opinion," Dale said, without rancor. "These marvellous Rawlings girls you've been raving about. Maybe they're all right in a number of ways. Maybe they miss out somewhere, too. You wouldn't think about that. Listen. If I don't like the food they serve in my restaurant I try the place across the street. Any objections?"

Obie pressed his lips into a straight line. "No," he said, evenly. "No objections."

They sat there silently for a few minutes, the air tense. Dale was the first to speak. "I suppose I should have

known better. Me, an experienced man of the world. Maybe the fault is mine. I don't know. I'm not a psychoanalyst. I just walk out on a movie when I'm not enjoying it. I don't go hunting for causes."

Obie shook his head, upset. "I don't know why I'm damned fool enough to argue with you. You'll do what you damned please, anyhow."

"Isn't it so?"

"I do know this. She'll be terribly upset, if she ever finds out. More than you would ever suspect."

"In that case we'll be sure that she doesn't. Unless you let a careless remark slip here and there. Otherwise it's quite simple, isn't it?"

"It wouldn't occur to you to be decent about it all?"

Dale drew himself up haughtily. "It all sounds fine, coming from you. I suppose you and your Southern sweetie spend your evenings discussing geometry."

"We get along all right. Listen. Leave us out of this. I don't go sniffing from one fence to the next. I like that kid. So far we haven't done anything about it, if that's all right with you."

Dale grinned in a superior manner. "Well. Nothing like spreading it out. Maybe I'll step in and help the lady out of her difficulties."

"Lay off," Obie said, grimly. "Don't even be funny about it."

Dale ignored the storm signals. "Nice shape she has. Small but curvy. I could go for her type. Tell me. Where does she model, anyhow?"

Obie leaned toward him, his face red. "Lay off, I told you. Keep away from Betty Lou. I'm telling you, not asking. I know what I want. I don't have to make my advances in a dark hallway. You can laugh at my technique.

I'm not using any this time. I like her. That's all. Go wave your curls at some other dame."

"Oh. I didn't know it was that way."

"It's that way. You know me. I don't ask for much. I want one girl who can see beyond my ugly puss and know that she likes me. That's more important to me than sweetness or charm or brains."

"She couldn't have too much of the latter."

"No. Oh, no." Obie glowered. "The bright ones fall for the curly eye-lashes and the old old line. Didn't I see four girls squirm at that making-tomorrow-of-all-my-yesterdays line in your play? Boy, how many times they must have heard that one. Dearest," he mimicked, "you've opened life's gates for me. You've made tomorrows of all my yesterdays."

Dale didn't mind. "It's worked, so far. Why change a winning game? I'm doing fairly well."

"I don't like it," Obie said, severely.

"*You* don't like it!"

"God." Obie took out his handkerchief and mopped his face. "I don't know why I'm wasting this lecture course on you. It's like teaching Latin to a gorilla. Go ahead. I don't give a good God-damn what you do. Wear yourself to a frazzle, if that's what you want. I've heard of success going to a man's head, but boy, it sure hit a detour in your carcass."

"Thanks for the advice." Dale had a funny smile on his face. "Maybe I'll think it over, but I doubt it." He got up and went to the door. "So long, lover." He waved, burlesquing. "See you at Madame Tessie's, after that burst of holiness wears off."

Obie turned to his desk without answering. Dale went out and buzzed for the elevator. He was in good spirits

and hummed as he walked up and down the hall. He didn't mind Obie's grouchiness. It only amused him. The old boy certainly went up in the air when he mentioned Betty Lou. That was the way it was with these older fellows. When they went soft and paternal they had to protect innocent womanhood from the rest of the prowling world. O.K., Galahad, do your stuff, if you think you can succeed. Give Betty Lou your finest paternal advice, stay away from the naughty man with the wavy hair. Yes, Grandma, I understand, I'll practise saying no diligently and in a very loud voice. Sure, and in one warm moment all teachings are forgotten. Well, unless Edwin were slipping, he should be able to supply the necessary impetus. Soft speech, practised lines, tender hands, and what are we waiting for, baby? The more he thought of it the more interesting it became. "Round heels," he hummed. "Round heels." He took a little dance step in the empty hall. He would get her a necklace, or pendant of some sort. Something to put around her neck. He thought of it resting against her soft skin, just above the curve of her breasts. He could smooth it with gentle hands, letting his fingers stray . . .

The elevator stopped and he got in. There was a girl in the corner. He kept his eyes on her, letting them shift from her body to her eyes, waiting for some sign of interest. She kept staring straight ahead. It didn't matter. He didn't care particularly about her. She was just another girl at the moment. He had more important things on his mind. Yes, more important things by far. "Dum dum di um dum. Round heels." He stepped out into the street. The sun was warm. It was a lovely day, just as there were to be many lovely days, lovely nights, in the weeks to come.

CHAPTER 13

MARTHA held a little toy roulette wheel in her palm and watched the ball spin crazily around. "Number seventeen," she said. "We're betting our gold on number seventeen. Don't ask me why." The ball came to rest in the groove marked four. Martha screwed up her face in disgust. "The game is crooked. I ought to know better."

"You've gone through all sorts of phases," Connie said, complacently. "What is this? Second childhood?"

"Jousting with Fate. Proving what we already know. That you can't win. I bought it in the ten-cent store. You wouldn't want to place a few of your filthy thousands on a number?"

"I had forty dollars in the bank the day I was married. Now I have nothing. That's progress, isn't it?"

"Look." Martha got up and reached for a brown pottery cracker-jar on the shelf. She opened it and held out a few ten-dollar bills. "The baby fund. Every week a ten-spot goes in there, willy-nilly. Not that I needed an added incentive, but they seem to grow around here." She put the money back. "You know that cute dark baby next door?"

"Little Petie? Has anything happened to him?"

"No. Nothing. They just packed up and moved. I came home one night and they were gone."

"Oh. That's a shame. I think you had warm feeling for that child."

"Warm? God. You don't know the half of it. He was starting to be part of my life. He'd come in here and rub his dirty little face up against my nice fresh dress and I'd feel I could die out of sheer happiness. So they pack up and move away. Never even said good-bye. Like the little ball spinning, and you can't tell where it will stop. They just take a chunk out of your soul and walk off with it and you're supposed to carry on as if nothing had happened. I don't care," she said, grimly, "because my mind's made up. I've said so before, but this time it goes. Not a cent comes out of that jar unless it pays for my baby. This is no act. You know me when I put my mind to a thing. Nothing will stop me. Nothing."

"It's a damned shame," Connie said, seriously. "Dale spending his money on crazy luxuries, and you skimping on pennies for something so terribly important."

"There's no connection. What's Dale's is his and what's mine is mine. I don't want anything from him, ever."

"I know. But you can't help comparing. Lord knows what he spent for that yellow car. Yellow. Of course he had to have a yellow car a block long. We couldn't have survived another day without it. See how important I am in all this. He never even asked me. Brought it home and parked it majestically in front of a fire hydrant. It's wrong to dump that much money on a man who never had anything. He can only think of foolish ways of spending it. What do we need a new apartment for? I liked our old place. We're no millionaires. I'll never get used to drapes over the windows. I'm a curtain girl. I'll swear he spent four or five thousand dollars furnishing the place. Why couldn't you have a small part of that?"

"I told you there's no connection," Martha said, testily. "He can buy the Empire State Building if he's in the mood."

I'm doing what I want to do. I know what I want. That's all. I've set my goal and I'll stick to it. Life begins at forty. New life. I can have my slogans too." She shook the wheel. "Twenty-two," she said, as she watched the tiny silver ball. It landed in twenty-eight. "Close, close," Martha said. "I'll hit it yet." She shrugged. "I don't know what'll happen when I do."

Connie looked away. Lights in the neighbors' apartments across the alley were starting to blink at her, like eyes shining through the jungle darkness, bringing back memories. That was years ago, part of the past. She'd had a good job then, too, and suddenly she had decided that she had to get away. She never knew from what. Just an urge to be on her way. And now it was creeping over her again. She got up, restless, and walked over to the window. "I'm going to go somewhere," she said, suddenly, as if talking to the blackness outside. "I'm fed up with things around here. I'm crammed to the ears." She turned and faced Martha defiantly. "I'm going, I tell you."

Martha watched her for a moment, feeling her heart go out to her. "What is it, Connie? Dale?"

Connie leaned against a chair, holding it as if it were bolstering her life. "I don't know. Everything." She picked up Martha's toy and held it appraisingly. "Round and round, the way life spins us. I'm tired of being tossed around."

"Don't quit on it, Connie. Why don't you take your vacation now? You don't have to wait until next summer. You've worked pretty hard. Maybe a rest is what you need. You'd be foolish to give up a good position, just when you're getting somewhere. Go away for a while. You'll come back with new vigor."

"It isn't that," Connie said, restlessly. "I don't know what it is. General discouragement. I'm sorry Dale got

all that money. It isn't what we wanted. What good is it if it doesn't bring happiness? Happiness. Where is it? In a long yellow car that needs a special garage? Not for me. You've found more of it in Bax's ten-dollar-a-week job."

"That's more than money. That's rehabilitation. He's alive now, important. Shaves every day. Doesn't putter around the house like an old lady. And that—" she pointed to the cracker-jar "—baby fund. If you can show me greater happiness than that—"

"That's what I mean. We've struggled, too, Dale and I, and I think we might have found something through adversity. We never will now."

"You're still better off with the money than without it."

"I wonder." Connie moved uneasily. "I wanted something else. I wish I knew what. Not your baby fund." She smiled. "I don't have that urge yet. Some day, maybe. I think I would have been happy if somebody had been willing to publish my book of poems. Apparently they're not important to anybody but me. Obie's tried everywhere."

"Hell's bells," Martha said. "That's the way with poetry. I'm glad I gave it up to type bills. Nobody reads poems any more. You've done some fine things. It doesn't mean that they're not good because they weren't commercial."

"I know. This rejection implies no lack of merit. That doesn't help. I need something to lift me. I'm in the dumps. Anything. Maybe that would have done it."

Martha paused uncertainly. "Listen," she said. "Don't tell me if you don't want to. Are you getting along all right with Dale?"

"Fair. I don't mind telling. We haven't struck each

other yet. Sometimes I think he'd be better off without me. I don't know why he married me." She hesitated. "Yes, I do, too."

Martha looked at her closely. "He doesn't hang out with that old crowd? Those God-forsaken dames who had a peculiar weakness for wavy hair? Does he?"

Connie lifted her head defiantly. "One thing I won't tolerate, and that's what you call hanging out. Anything but that. I'm supposed to be broadminded but you can't change six generations by living in Manhattan for a few years. I've read and I've broadened and I've heard about man's well-known predatory nature, but there's something inside of me that won't accept it. If it's just bodies he wants he can have all he can handle, but he's not going to include mine in the lot. And that's that." She spun the wheel viciously and slammed it down on the table, as if to punctuate her remarks. "Nine," she said. They watched the ball in silence. Round and round, like a life in the hands of Fate. Then it popped into number nine and stopped. "As easy as that," Connie said. "What do we do now? Make a wish?"

Betty Lou sat with her legs draped over the corner of Obie's desk, so that whenever he took his eyes away from her face they seemed to rest on her rounded knees. "Let's get this straight," Obie said. "I don't want you running around with Dale."

She pushed her hat back from her forehead, looking younger and jauntier than ever. "Really, Mr. Smythe," she said, haughtily. "And since when have you assumed control of my destinies?"

"Good God. You even talk like him. Where do you get this control of destinies stuff? I knew you when you had to watch your dems and dose."

"They speak English in Birmingham, Alabama," she said.

"Hey? Since when?"

"You can be very disagreeable without even trying. I'd like to see you when you put your heart into it."

"Listen, Betty Lou. I don't want to fight with you. What's come over us? I thought we were moving along nicely. I wanted you to come down to Trenton with me some week-end. Meet Mom. You used to ask me about her. You were real sweet, kid. Now this curly-eyed hound starts practising his curtain speech on you and you go to pieces. Don't do it, baby. I know him. I've known him for years. He'll sell his own grandmother down the river if it would help him make some trifling advance."

"He's your friend," she said, coldly.

"Sure he is. I know him backwards and forwards. He has some good traits. And some lousy ones. The lousy ones pop out wherever a girl is concerned. He goes a bit crazy at a new face, a new shape. After he gets what he wants he loses interest fast. He's always after something new, something hard to get. That's the way he is. I know him. Stay away from him, I tell you."

"He *is* your friend. You couldn't say things like that about anybody who wasn't, could you?"

"I'm only trying to help you," he said desperately.

"You buy a girl's lunch a few times and you think you own her. I can take care of myself, Mr. Smythe."

"Don't call me Mr. Smythe." He pounded the desk.

"Don't—don't shout at me," she returned. "I'm not your wife."

"Betty Lou." He could feel the perspiration on his forehead. He sat back for a moment and tried to be calm. "How about tonight? I'll phone Mom. We can leave early and be there in time for supper. How about it? I wasn't

going until tomorrow, but why not now? I want Mom to see you. She'll love you, your cute little turn-up nose and that soft smooth skin. Mom always was one for beauty. She was the belle of Greenwood, South Carolina. Bet you didn't know Mom was a you-all, too. Yes, sir. Come on, sweet, what do you say?"

She shook her head. "Not tonight, Obie." She tilted her head and smiled gently at him, smiled so that he went soft all over, inside. "Next week, maybe. I—I have a date. Don't be angry. I'm alone so much. I never know if you're going to call me or not. It's true, isn't it?"

"I guess so," he said. "It's mostly my fault. When I see you like this I feel as if I'm going to melt. I'm—I'm older than you. Twenty-five years older, if you must know. I can pat my hair back neatly and wear snappy campus clothes, but when I stand next to you the years pop out all over the place. That's why I stay away. I want to be with you all the time. Honestly I do. You're so sweet. I could look at your soft loveliness from morning to night. Go ahead, baby. Have a good time. I'll see you tomorrow, won't I?"

"Lunch?" she said. "I'm kind of broke anyhow. I could use a good lunch." She slid off the desk. "Obie. You do like me, don't you?"

"You're tops with me, sweet." He looked at his watch. "O.K. Tomorrow at one. Shall I meet you somewhere or do you want to poke that pretty little face in here and pick me up?"

"I'll come for you." She smiled happily. "My pretty little face," she said. "I'm glad you think so, Obie. I haven't much else in the world."

The doorman bowed politely and held the door for Connie. The man at the desk nodded and made a frozen at-

tempt to smile. The neatly uniformed elevator boy stood at attention until she was safely in the car. You get all that when you pay a hundred and twenty dollars a month for three rooms. She let herself into the apartment and snapped on the light. Dale wasn't home yet. Naturally. It was only a little after eight. These movie conferences take time.

She let her glance rove around the large living-room with that same feeling of displeasure. Half old, half new. The few things salvaged from her old place, and the newer things Dale had purchased with wanton disregard for unity. Everything clashed. Perhaps some of the pieces could be returned. Some could be dyed. Some could be hidden behind other pieces of furniture. The place was a nightmare. She'd start arranging things if she knew when he was going to stop his mad purchases. But he was a sucker for a salesman. Some day somebody would talk him into buying the obelisk in Central Park. Who but a playwright, and a crazy one at that, would get chromium plated white leather chairs and coffee tables, and a lovely maple Colonial high-boy? And with that her few simple lovely things, antiques she had picked after painstaking months of scouting in the little shops that dotted lower Third Avenue. It was a shame, to spend as much as he had spent, and have the place look like a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer storeroom. That couch alone must have cost a thousand dollars. And it was so definitely *his* money. At no point had she been consulted. The stuff was dumped on her and she was supposed to like it.

Price tags. That was what he went by. He'd rather buy an ugly chair for a hundred dollars than a lovely one for five. Then why remove the tags? Keep them in plain view, so that you can tell people that the place is a sight, but see how much it cost! He didn't have to throw his

money away like that. "Sweet," he'd said, pinching her cheek. "I can do it again. Again and again. This is only the beginning. Buy yourself perfumed bath salts, my pet, because you're going to learn to live in luxury."

"But we can't afford it, Dale. Wait. We have time. We don't have to spend it all at once. Spread it out, over a year or two, and see what comes in meanwhile." Good sound common sense, and he had ridiculed it.

"We have to show people that we're in the money. Advertise, publicize. That's how we got our start, and that's the way we carry on. Wait until Horse Harkover does my play. We'll be in the real money. The movies will be ashamed to offer less than a hundred thousand for a Harkover-Edwin play. We've arrived, I tell you. We're out of the ham-and-egg class."

So they were. There was still money in the bank, thousands, and now they could sit on the ultra-modern chromium chairs and stare at the Colonial high-boy. That should bring you a tremendous measure of happiness. Big, big. Do things in a big way. There was the story about the movie actress who hated publicity and couldn't imagine why the crowds stared at her car as she drove through the streets, except that it was a block long and had her name strung out in Neon lights . . . All Dale needed was the lights. Dale Edwin, America's gift to the theatre. Dale Edwin, greatest living playwright. If you hear it often enough you get to believe it. Dale Edwin . . . Dale Edwin . . .

She hung her coat in the closet and perched her hat on one of the trees. The bedroom was as bad as the living-room. More like a seraglio. Seraglio! She hadn't thought of that before. But Dale wouldn't do that, wouldn't bring other girls up here in the middle of the day, while she was safely tucked away in her office. No. He wouldn't.

Tonight Dale had a date. That is, an appointment. Dinner with some movie big shot from the coast. Of course it might be something else. You could never be sure of these business appointments. Infidelity. That was an ugly word. Still, people nowadays laughed at it. It was the butt of humor on stage and screen, the unsuspecting husband returning unexpectedly from a trip and finding his best friend hiding in the closet. The little man in the audience howling with glee, because it is his neighbor who is the cuckold, never himself.

One thing I won't tolerate, she had told Martha. But if you are confronted with it, what do you do? That is, after the hysterics die down. What do you do? You can find courses of instruction about everything but that. Shoot him, scold him, leave him, love him, what does one do? Suddenly you are faced with a problem, and the answer isn't an easy one. You have to review your relationship, and you discover that it's strange. Why did you marry him? Well, you weren't so sure about love. After a while you wonder if it isn't a creation of disillusioned romanticists. You got along rather nicely, and you knew that he was handsome, and you respected certain things about him, his writing integrity, and his zeal, and you knew you were a bit jealous when other girls gathered around him, and then you were carried away by a moonlit night and a few soft speeches, and you said, yes. Why not? If there is going to be any great love you will certainly discover that later, when marriage has brought you so much closer than ever before.

Then there's the other side. Why did he marry you? After you sifted out the other answers, one remained, staring at you starkly. He wanted your body. Dale must have the unattainable at any cost, even marriage. And now he had it, and somehow, somewhere along the line, she knew

that she had failed. Or else there wasn't as much to this sex business as one is led to believe. You read about sex murders and sex suicides and sex crimes until you feel that there must be some urge so great that ordinary intellect cannot withstand it. Whatever it was, it wasn't there, for her. Or for her and Dale, as a unit.

She hadn't come through with colors flying. She knew that. Then perhaps it wasn't unreasonable to suspect that Dale might be seeking his pleasures elsewhere. That, dear children, is what is known as having a business appointment with a big movie executive.

Connie slid her shoes from her feet and changed from her dress to a soft house-coat. I hope it isn't so, she kept thinking, over and over. I hope it isn't so.

"What do you say?" Hank asked. "Can you take care of the dump for a couple of days?"

"Sure," Baxter said, eagerly. "I have the hang of it. Go ahead, Hank, it'll do you good to get away."

"It isn't that. I never seem to get a chance to go home. You'd think my mother lived in China. This salesman's driving right to Pittsburgh. If we leave early in the morning we can be back by Tuesday. Give me a nice week-end at home."

Baxter stood a bit straighter. Responsibility. He could do it. Years ago he had drawn up contracts for some of the biggest companies in the East. Yes, and they'd had full confidence in him. Now Hank wanted him to mind the store. Well, it was a long way from the things he had done, but it was nice that somebody had faith in him again. He waved his hand in an executive manner. "Leave it to me. I'll take care of everything."

"Well." Nothing could happen. They had an orderly

system, the prices marked plainly on each article, so that Baxter would run into no difficulty there. He might lose a sale or two through lack of knowledge of the stock, but what of it? It couldn't amount to more than a few dollars, at worst. And he *did* want to see his mother. He was like a kid about that. What use was there in having an assistant if you couldn't take advantage of it some time? "I won't be here in the morning, then. Jot down a few notes. No harm in that. Closing up. Lock that window in the rear. Pull the iron grating over it and lock that. All lights out. Lock door, double lock. That's easy. Selling. Prices as marked. Be sure to get the sales tax. If you don't we're out of pocket. You'll be busy Saturday night. Don't get flustered. Wait on as many people at once as you can. You know, leave one while he examines something and start on the next. If there are kids in the store, try to stay between them and the door. Don't act suspicious of them, though. Make your deposit on the way home. Don't leave money in the store over night. Got that? The bank is open all hours. Keep ten dollars in small bills and silver. If you run short the shoestore will have change. O.K.? I guess that's all. Oh. Don't buy anything. Anything at all. No matter what. We're overstocked as it is. I've been worrying about the stock. I think I bought too heavily. We'll run a sale when I get back. We have to turn some of this into cash before the tenth. Most of the bills are due then. Maybe you can sketch up a circular. Gigantic sale, or something. All right?"

"Sure, Hank." He glanced at his list. He could do it. It meant something, something more than minding a store while the boss was away. Some day Hank would open a second store, uptown, maybe, and the gold letters on the window would say, Management of Baxter Cunningham,

Third. Why not? He knew how to handle things. A pleasant feeling went through him. He had old Whiskers by the throat now. That jinx was finished, dead as a door-nail.

"You can start right now," Hank said. "Here comes your first customer."

A short stocky man with an uneven walk came into the store and stepped over to the counter. "Le's see some boxin' gloves," he said.

"Mr. Cunningham will take care of you," Hank said, magnanimously. "Well, so long, Bax. I want to get a good night's rest." He put out his hand.

"So long, Hank. Have a good time. And don't worry. I'll take care of everything in good shape."

They shook hands, and Hank got his hat and coat. Outside the store he stopped and looked at it tenderly. Baxter seemed to be taking care of the customer nicely. The tough ones didn't bother him. Hank's eyes fell on the lettering on the window. Hank Brady, Sports. Well, it wasn't a hell of a lot, but it was nice to know that it was his. He nodded, satisfied. Everything was fine. What could go wrong over a week-end?

"I'm glad you wore green," Dale said.

"Are you?" Betty Lou sat back in the car, content. "Why?"

"Well, it picks you up a bit. Gives you that wicked look that turns beauty into allure. And besides, it harmonizes with the car." His hand rested on the box that bulged in his pocket. Something had told him to get green. It was perfect. For you, my Betty Lou. She would open the box with a little cry of delight, the way the naive girls do in the movies. But that was to come later, the surprise

of the evening. They would drive to that little pine lodge restaurant, up Boston Post Road a way, and stop there for dinner. Between courses he would whirl her around the tiny dance floor, pressing her light clinging body close to his in a way that must be unmistakable. Then he would have to work the conversation around to the upstairs rooms. He wasn't sure of the exact method at the moment, but something would surely come to mind. Something always did. The last one went up to see the air-raid shelter! Not that Betty Lou needed any subterfuge. She knew her way around. Maybe he'd just ask her upstairs, and see how things developed from that point. There would be a way. He wasn't worried about that. He still had the old Edwin technique, and anything that's worked before can work again.

She took long breaths of the fresh cool air. "Are you really writing a part for me?" she asked, in her breathless way.

"It's writing itself," he said, trying to sound fervent. "It lives you, breathes you. No one could do it but you."

"You didn't think I was so hot in your one-act play."

"You were all right. Nervous, that's all. You won't be in this part. It's you."

"Oh, Dale," she said, eagerly. "It's sweet of you, really it is."

He took his eyes off the road to steal quick glances at her. "You're so lovely, Betty Lou. You've more than beauty. There's a fresh young sweetness, something that makes a person's heart go out to you." Now he was in his stride, going nicely. "There's only one word to describe you. Lovely. They ought to rope it off for you alone and not let anybody else near it."

"Do you mean it?" she said. "Do you really?"

"You know I do." You can't keep that up forever, without some of the shine wearing off the edges. They want it, though, in an endless stream. You mustn't for a second intimate that your prime motive at the moment is to hold that soft clinging body in your arms. No. You must lead up to that gently, gradually, through a maze of words.

"Obie didn't want me to go," she said.

"Does he know you're out with me?"

"No. I told him I had a date. He didn't ask."

"Obie's all right," he said, "in a sedate way."

"I like him," she said seriously. "He's been awfully good to me."

"And vice versa."

"What?"

"You two must have a lot of fun together," he said, knowing it was the wrong thing to say.

"We have lunch," she said, puzzled. "Movies. Sure it's fun."

"Sure it is," he mocked. He took his right hand from the wheel and let it slip around her shoulder. "I mean this." He pulled her toward him.

"No. No. We don't. Honestly. We don't go in for that."

"Not even this?" He moved his hand quickly to her throat and tried to slip it down from there.

"Dale!" she said, startled. Then, pulling herself together, she moved her body away from his, tugging at his hand with both of hers. Once he had gotten that far he wouldn't relinquish his hold. "Don't, Dale," she pleaded. "Please don't."

Please don't. The same old line. Play hard to get, girlie, hang on to that tremendously important virtue, or at least go through the customary motions. Rule Number

One, as taught in all the better finishing schools, Never give in without a struggle. Otherwise the boys will think your heels are round. We know the line, don't we, Betty Lou? O.K., if you want it that way. We've had girls like that before and they all managed to reconsider before the evening was over.

He kept the car rolling along at about forty miles an hour, trying to caress her with his free hand in spite of her determined resistance. "Dale," she said, upset and angry, "I asked you to stop. I came out with you to discuss the part you were writing for me."

"Sure," he said complacently. "Sure. We can do a little of that, too."

She sat in silence for a while. He smiled. Apparently she was beginning to see the light. One of her hands had stopped its feverish tugging. Soon she would be reclining in his arms, a soft acquiescent bundle. They all did, after a while. Then he noticed that she was reaching for the door, turning the handle so that it slipped from its catch. "Take your hand away," she said, firmly, "or I'm going to get out."

He laughed. "The old roller-skate routine." He took advantage of her momentary lapse and held her closer, his eager fingers reaching for the curve of her breasts. She twisted quickly to slip from his embrace. The car lurched as he lost control, and startled, he brought his other hand to the wheel and swung it sharply back toward the road. Betty Lou, suddenly released, fell away from him, tried desperately to clutch at something as the car veered, missed, and tumbled headlong through the open door. Dale turned as she screamed, made a futile grab for her flying dress, already beyond his reach, and saw her body land in a heap at the side of the road. Pale with fright and fear, he

jammed on the brakes and ran to where she lay, still and silent as a pale ghost.

"Betty Lou," he said, his voice shaking. "Betty Lou. Oh, God . . ." He picked her up and carried her to the car, letting her body slide into the seat. She sat there, barely conscious, the relentless blood dripping steadily over the front of her dress.

"Betty Lou," he said, almost pleading. "I didn't mean it. Oh, God—" He crouched low behind the wheel and drove with trembling fingers, drove slowly down the road until one of the overhanging lights threw its ghastly beams into the car. Then he saw the cut across her face and a sick and hopeless feeling made his body go cold.

The taxi pulled up in front of the Brady shop and grunted to a stop. Connie got out, her face white. "Wait," she said, and ran into the store.

Baxter came forward to meet her. "Yes, Madam," he said, gallantly. "What can I do for you, Madam?"

She shook her head and passed her hand across her forehead, feeling that she might faint. "Don't, Bax. Where is Hank?"

He noticed for the first time that something was wrong. "What is it, Connie? What's happened?"

Baxter couldn't help her. She needed strength now. "Where is he?"

"Hank? He left, just a few minutes ago. Went to his room to pack."

"Pack?" she said, emptily. "Is he going away?"

"Just for a few days."

"Can you get him on the phone?"

"Sure." He hurried to the dial, anxious to please. "What shall I tell him?"

"Is it near here?"

"Only a couple of blocks."

"Ask him to come over. Tell him it's important. I must see him. I must."

She dropped wearily into a chair as she heard Baxter call. Strength. That was what she needed now, more than anything. Hank's strength, to flow through his arms to her, to give her courage to bear new burdens, burdens that seemed too great. Hank would come. He was the one for that. He would help her now, help her hang on to life when she wasn't sure whether she wanted to or not. You could depend on Hank. That was one thing you could be certain of in a world that was starting to crumble. She got up and stood near the door, knowing that it would be only minutes before he arrived.

She saw him up the street, hatless, running. In a few seconds he was at the door. "What is it, Connie? What's wrong?"

"Help me," she said. "I can't face things." She motioned to the waiting taxi. Baxter watched them, bewildered. They got into the cab. "Polyclinic Hospital," she said. Then she sat back as if the bottom had dropped out of her world. Hank kept his eyes on her strained face, waiting. Cars were rushing by them, horns screaming, but they were alone, away from the turmoil that was struggling to make itself part of their lives. The eager cab darted through the traffic, gaining a few yards by a quick spurt past a swerving car, only to lose its advantage as the warning light flashed red.

Connie bit the ends of her gloves. She could feel Hank's wondering gaze. "Once I imagined you galloping to the rescue," she said, "but you didn't show up. You should have come, Hank. You might have saved me."

"Tell me," he said, simply. "What's wrong?"

"Betty Lou," she said, miserably. "Do you remember her? Obie's been going with her. He phoned me, a little while ago. She's had a terrible accident. I feel so sick. Her face. Her lovely face. Obie says it—" she was crying, softly, as she spoke—"it—it's a horrible jagged cut—"

"Betty Lou!" He couldn't keep the surprise out of his voice. "That little Southern girl? Were you so friendly with her?"

"It isn't that. It's—well, it's what happened. She fell out of a car. Probably hit a rock, Obie thought." She paused, her throat full. "Dale's car," she said, in a low tone.

"Oh." There was a long tense silence.

"I can't face it," she said, desperately. "Help me, Hank. Help me."

"What can I do? I'm not part of all this. I can't go butting in where I'm not wanted, not needed. I'll do anything I can for Betty Lou. Nothing more, Connie. You must understand that."

She nodded, unhappily. "I know. I just want you near, now. I need somebody's strength. Something's happened to mine." She leaned close to him, still sobbing.

He put his arm around her, holding her gently. That was what she needed. The cab continued to pick its crafty way through the maze of traffic, then drew up triumphantly before the large cold building. The driver glanced back, waiting. Hank pressed her again, then took his arm away. "You'll have to face it alone," he said. "Courage, Connie."

She found her tiny handkerchief and dried her eyes. "I'll try."

"I'm going away for a few days. I'll see you as soon as I get back."

They got out of the cab and she put out her hand. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have bothered you so. But you've helped me, Hank. Honestly. Thanks. Thanks a lot."

She climbed up the dull gray steps, and at the top turned to wave an uncertain hand. He acknowledged it with a friendly nod and she turned and went into the building, not knowing for the life of her why she had gone to Hank, except that an old Sherlock Holmes story kept running through her mind, the story of a woman who, under stress, had rushed to her dearest possession . . .

Book Three

ANOTHER DAY

CHAPTER I

BAXTER picked up one of the lighter baseball bats and swung it in a clumsy ineffectual manner. Cunningham now batting for Hank Brady. He couldn't help smiling proudly. He was doing it. *He*, Baxter Cunningham, Third, and so far everything had gone smoothly. True, it was only yesterday that Hank had left, but he had utilized every minute of his time alone. The store shone. That was one thing he could do, keep the place neat and orderly. The few customers that had come in had been taken care of nicely and had gone away pleased. He could run things. There was no doubt about that. Run them efficiently, just as the Baxter Cunningham of ten years ago would have done. He *hadn't* slipped. He hadn't. That was only a state of mind. Your brains get lazy through lack of use, and then when you call on them suddenly they just don't function as smoothly as they once did. But there was nothing wrong with him, nothing serious. He used to be quite a fellow. He would show people now, Martha, and Hank, and all of them, that he was good as he ever was.

He spread a large sheet of paper over the counter, and scrawled on it in clumsy letters. "OVERSTOCK SALE. UNUSUAL REDUCTIONS—FOR A LIMITED PERIOD." He stood back and surveyed it. Not bad. Dignified, and still it told the story. He didn't like these flashy signs that promised ridiculous bargains. Hank would approve of this

one. Perhaps he would get the sign fellow up the street to letter it nicely, so that it would be all ready when Hank got back. They were overstocked. Things hadn't moved as fast as they expected. Well, a vigorous and energetic selling campaign could probably turn a lot of merchandise into cash. He hoped so. He'd do anything in his power to help Hank. Anything.

The door opened. It was the short shifty-looking boxing manager who had bought the gloves the night before. "Harya," he said, brusquely, his eyes searching the store.

"Good morning," Baxter said, politely. He knew how to handle the tough ones. Be polite with them, but not subservient.

"Where's the big fellow?"

"Mr. Brady is away. Anything I can do for you?"

"Yeh. Look at them gloves. What do they make the laces outa, spaghetti? They bust first time my kid put 'em on."

Baxter smiled in his best appeasing manner. "I'm sorry. We should have given you the cow-hide laces. They're much stronger." He found a pair and handed them to the man. "No charge," he said, amiably.

"O.K.," the man said. He glanced at Baxter's sign. "Sellin' out?"

"No. No. Just an overstock sale. Come around next week. We'll have some good values for you."

"When's the big fellow gettin' back?"

"Monday or Tuesday. He's out West. On business." Might as well sound impressive, even to the hard-boiled trade.

"Right. Maybe I'll be around." He paused and glanced at a framed newspaper clipping, the last of those Hank had kept. "Carnegie Tech, hey?" He thought for a moment. "I once handled a kid from Carnegie Tech." He shook his

head. "They ain't scrappers, them college kids. Don't like to get their ears mussed." He edged toward the door. "Well, be seein' you."

Baxter went back of the counter, satisfied. It was important to take care of complaints properly. He had done as well as anybody could have. Perhaps better. He could really run things while Hank was away.

It was a dull morning. Only seven dollars in the register. That wasn't good for Saturday. Maybe after lunch they would start trickling in. He hoped so. It would be nice to greet Hank with good news. Something to show that Baxter Cunningham, Third, was on the job. Not that he could do anything about drawing customers to the store, unless he just sat back and wished. Sometimes that worked. It was one of those things worth trying. No harm could come of it. He'd wished up things before, good things and bad. Perhaps he could do it again. If he could, there was nobody he'd rather do it for than Hank.

At ten minutes to twelve a burly, snappily dressed man strode into the store. He walked up to the counter, important, impressive. "Brady here?"

"He's out of town," Baxter said. "Can I help you?"

"H'm. No. I guess not." He took a card from his pocket. "Tell him I was in, will you?" He let a confidential hand rest on the counter. "I've known Brady for years. We played football together."

Baxter glanced at the card. "Parker Elliot. Carnegie Tech Athletic Association," he said, out loud. "I'll tell Mr. Brady you were here."

"Too bad I missed him. I don't get to New York much. You couldn't get him on the phone, could you? It's pretty important. I got some business for him."

"No," Baxter said, unhappily. "He didn't tell me where

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"No," Baxter said, unhappily. "He didn't tell me where

I could reach him. He'll be back not later than Tuesday. Can't I take care of it?"

"I don't think so." He kept his eyes on Baxter's face. "You see, we give Brady our yearly order for athletic material. Sort of like to help the old boys out when we can. Well, they slipped up this year. The stuff should of been there a couple of weeks ago, only they forgot to place the order. So they rush me up to New York with a blank check and I got to load up and bring it back in a hurry. Need it for our Monday morning opening. Guess I'll hop a cab up to Spalding's. They got a big stock there anyhow. Tell Brady I'm sorry. I'll give him next year's order sure." He took a tentative step toward the door.

Baxter swallowed hard. "Much—much stuff?" he managed to say.

The man let his eyes rove round the place. "Sure. Twice as much as you got here. But we could start with this, and get another load in a week or so."

Baxter stood there, uncertainly. There was the opportunity, just as he'd wished for it, and now he was going to let it slip. Hank would never forgive him. He could swing it. He had to, that was all. He put on his best executive manner. "I'm in full charge while Mr. Brady is away," he said, importantly. "Handle everything. Even his legal work. Now, just tell me the items you want and I'm sure we can work this out." He kept his head erect, and hoped Mr. Elliot wouldn't notice the way his voice tended to slip in his excitement. This was his big chance, and he wasn't going to miss it. He had to make good, for himself as much as for Hank. He noticed his customer's hesitation, and leaned toward him eagerly. "What do you say, Mr. Elliot?"

Elliot thought for a moment, then shook his head. "No.

No, I guess not. See, I used to get a special discount from Brady on big shipments. Straight ten percent." He shrugged. "You probably ain't—you probably haven't the authority to do it. You sure you can't get in touch with Brady some way?"

"I can't. There's no way in the world." He tried to pull himself together, to be the impressive business man again. But his mind was whirling and he couldn't think clearly. One thing he knew, though, and that was that he mustn't let this fellow get away. Monday would be too late. The material would be purchased elsewhere, and he and Hank would proceed with their trifling sale, struggling for weeks to sell what could be moved in one grand sweep. He tried to clear his brain, and one remark of Elliot's came back to him. "You say you have a signed check?"

"Right here. All I got to do is fill in the amount. We always pay cash. Rule of the organization."

What, after all, was ten percent? They'd probably reduce prices that much, or more, in their coming sale. He couldn't go wrong. Perhaps it was a big decision for him to make, but he'd made more important decisions than that in the past. It was all right. He knew that it was. He could handle it. He could show Hank. He slapped his trembling hand on the counter. "I'll do it, Mr. Elliot," he said, his voice shaking. "Straight ten percent. What will you take?"

"It's up to you, son. Don't get yourself in trouble. It's a big order."

"The bigger the better," he said, exultantly. "Is it a deal?"

"O.K. I'd rather give it to Brady than to Spalding's. Can I use your phone?" He dialed a number and spoke quickly. "Right away. Yeh. A real big truck. O.K. And

rush it. We got to get this stuff rolling." He hung up and turned to Baxter. "We can start getting the stuff ready."

In a few minutes the big truck was backed up at the door. Baxter got two of the bigger boys from the street to help. He would give them a dollar each. It was the most exciting moment of his life. He was doing something, something big. Each time an article went by he jotted it down on a long strip of paper. Mr. Elliot stood next to him and said, "Check." Then they went back into the store and picked out another batch of supplies. Baxter was getting dizzy. He hadn't done so much in years. But he could do it. He would show them. He wasn't washed up. Not by a damned sight. He could do it.

It came to four thousand two hundred and thirty dollars, and after he deducted the ten percent discount Mr. Elliot filled in the check, the net amount being three thousand eight hundred and seven dollars. Very little remained on the shelves, and the store-room in the rear was virtually clean. Mr. Elliot glanced at his watch. "Well. We did a good day's work, didn't we, son?"

"Didn't we, though?" Baxter mopped his perspiring forehead. "Think you'll be back next week? We'll have to stock up all over again."

"A few weeks. I'll be in touch with Brady. Well, so long. Thanks for your help." He shook hands hurriedly and went out to the truck.

Four thousand dollars! Four thousand dollars! Baxter looked at the check proudly. Signed by somebody-or-other. Chairman of Athletic Board. There was a clean profit there of over a thousand dollars. Maybe Hank would open another store, farther uptown, now that he knew that Baxter could run things. The excitement of it all was getting

to be too much for him. He could feel pains creeping along the cords at the back of his neck, and he was afraid that he might be sick.

But he'd done it. Done it in great shape. Beaten the jinx. That was the way, the only way. Stop catering to a jinx and you've got it licked. He sat down weakly and laughed. It was funny, when you came to think of it. Here he'd pulled off what was probably the finest deal in the history of the Brady Sports Shop, and still the one thing that had been worrying him for weeks was the fear that he might bring his hard luck down on Hank. Hard luck! He'd put it over in a tremendous way. Probably better than Hank would have done. Three thousand eight hundred dollars. He leaned back limply in his chair. He'd done it. Nobody could tell him he wasn't good, good as he ever was.

His eye fell on his paper sign. Unusual reductions. He got up slowly but happily and crumpled it in his hands. They wouldn't have to run any sales now.

CHAPTER 2

CONNIE sat at her desk, staring straight ahead of her. There was a lay-out propped against the wall, something cute, with a saucy-looking girl wearing whatever it was they were going to advertise. The lettering was blurred. She rubbed her eyes, wondering if she needed glasses. Most of the girls wore glasses, putting them carefully in the top drawers of their desks when their day's work was done. She blinked a few times, trying to get her mind back to her work.

They don't tell you much over the telephone. Betty Lou's condition was good. There was definitely no danger. I know, I know, but that scar, that frightening scar. Clear across the side of her face. How could you let that happen to a girl, to a young and pretty girl, with her whole life still before her, an eager, happy, vibrant life, and now an ugly blot was scrawled across it, never to be erased. It was more than you could bear. Sweet kid. Quiet, and resigned, and uncomplaining, and thanking them softly for the flowers. What could they do? You were part of all this, and you want to help, so you stand by her bed with a sinking heart and hold out your apologetic flowers.

Last night was a horror. Dale had offered to drive her home from the hospital, but she wouldn't ride with him, even though she knew that she would have to face him later. But she didn't want him to do anything for her.

She got to the apartment ahead of him, and washed quickly, wanting to shower but dispensing with it because she was anxious to be under the covers before he reached home. She crawled into the bed as if she were a criminal, moving to the very edge so that his body would not touch hers even by accident, and then she lay there, hands clasped under her head, eyes wide open in the darkness, and waited. Waited, and waited. It must have been hours before she fell asleep, and then it was a fitful sort of slumber, her body uncomfortable and her mind harassed. Dale didn't come home. It was only when the early morning light started sifting through the heavy drapes that she realized it. Then she let herself move, ever so slightly, toward the middle of the bed, some of the tenseness slipping from her as her eyes closed again. But she was up early, and took her shower, and felt better for the moment, until she started thinking about Betty Lou again.

The girl in the ad was swinging a floppy hat in a loose vivacious hand. Young, happy, care-free. Connie bit her lips. No use trying to work. The picture needed some cheerful heading, something snappy, light. How can you work if your mind won't stay put, not even for a moment, and your eyes don't function properly? New things were happening to Connie. She was learning to cry. Silently, softly, inside. But it's crying, just the same, and sometimes a tear or so manages to find its way to the surface and then your ads appear blurred and you wonder if you need glasses. Care-free. One of those light, happy-go-lucky phrases that should roll off the tongue of an experienced copy-writer. What can you do if it doesn't come? She didn't really need it today. It was Saturday, and soon the office would be closed. Dale might be home. He couldn't keep ducking out of things. Staying away from home

wouldn't solve any problems. There was so much that had to be discussed, and none of it was going to be pleasant.

"Whatever I've done," Dale explained, carefully, "was more unfortunate than vicious. I don't go around bludgeoning young girls. If she hadn't hit a rock she wouldn't have more than a trifling bump somewhere. Then I wouldn't be a criminal."

"You play around the edge of a situation," Connie said, trying to control her emotions. "Why don't you go deeper? You shouldn't have been out with her in the first place."

"Oh. Is that my crime? I want to know, so that I can defend myself properly."

"Don't make a farce of this. We *have* something to discuss, haven't we? You stay away from home for a night and think that everything is nicely settled. Well, it isn't. This time it's too vital to a couple of lives."

"What do *you* want? A confession? Keep at it. You'll hear plenty. I was out with Betty Lou. Sure I was. I told you I was at a movie conference. It was easier to say that. Next time I'll tell you the truth."

"Next time."

"You might as well know. There'll be a next time."

"Maybe. Maybe you'll be explaining it to somebody. Not to me."

"So it's that way, is it?"

"It's that way." She could feel the cold fury inside her, body, swaying her, making a new and harder person of her. So she was going to make a go of her marriage. She'd seen too many slip and fall by the wayside. Not hers. Not ours. But it was too late. It was gone, whatever

they'd had or thought they'd had was gone, and it would never return.

"You wouldn't consider trying to act like a moderately intelligent person, would you?" he asked. "I don't want people jumping down my throat. I don't feel that I've done anything. Anything willful, I mean. It was pure accident. We must start with that as a basis."

"That's only part of it. Everything you did was horrible. You want to ignore your actions and stick to the accident."

He leaned back in his chair, his eyes on the ceiling, and moved his tongue across his lips. "Look, Connie," he said, after a while, still not facing her. "We don't hit it off too well, do we?"

"We don't, do we?" she said, her voice low. It was coming now, and she might as well face it. "I haven't much basis for comparison. I used to think we were about average, as married couples go. Now I see we're not even that. I don't know where the fault lies. I've put up with a lot." She thought for a moment. "I must have missed out somewhere, too, or you wouldn't have started looking elsewhere. I don't know how these things work. I suppose infidelity is mixed up in it in some way."

"I won't lie to you. I had definite ideas about Betty Lou. Not love. She's a silly child with a nice body. Put it that way. Physical attraction. Something for the moment, not for the years. I put my arms around her once, and her body seemed to melt. I wanted more of it. Much more. So I went after it."

"You put your arms around her?" Connie asked, upset. "When?"

Dale shook his head, pityingly. "Are you really that simple? It's hard to believe. You look as shocked as if I

had raped your grandmother. Perhaps we don't talk the same language. Are you grown up, or are you still reading the Elsie books? Haven't you heard of that sort of thing? Good God. Do you really, do you honestly think that I haven't been around these last few months? Is it possible that you didn't know? I've never tried too hard to hide it. I used the flimsiest sort of excuses, merely not to bring the obvious into the open." He spread his hands, as if revealing everything. "I want you to know, now."

She wanted to put her hand over her heart, to know that it was still there. "I can't believe it," she said, unable to control the slipping of her voice. "I can't. You're just saying it to hurt me. I would have known, in some way. It isn't true."

"It's true, all right," he said, easily. "Don't you worry about that. The amazing thing is your reaction. Somehow I don't care. Frankly, you appear just a bit silly. I don't consider myself a terrible person. I am what I am. You may not care for it. That's a matter of opinion. I'm not going to change. Ever."

"It doesn't matter, now," she said, tensely. "Nothing matters, very much." She sat slumped in the easy-chair, her anger turned to emptiness. "Hopes," she said, dully. "And I had hopes for a happy marriage."

"It's all in the way you accept things. Suppose I threw a fit every time you did something that you considered trifling. We'd have plenty to fuss about, wouldn't we?"

"Something trifling," she said, bitterly. "Only to me it's all-important. Why is that? Am I a freak of some sort? I don't go dumping my body around in other men's beds. Why don't I have this same terrific urge?"

He got up and walked to the window. He half-turned

to face her, then stared out at the night again. "You're cold," he said, bluntly. "There isn't an emotion in your carcass."

"I'm *not* cold," she said, passionately. "I'm *not*. I feel things, deep moving stirring things. How can you stand there and tell me I'm cold? We haven't clicked, that's all. And you blame me. It's easier that way. Find your ridiculous excuses for the things you want to do. What difference does it make, now?" Her head was forward so that her chin touched her chest, and her shoulders slumped as if all the strength had gone out of them.

He turned from the window and looked at her, appraising her coldly. "No difference, as far as I can see. Maybe you're right. We never did have that certain something for each other, did we?"

She kept her head low, not answering him. It was the end of everything for them. Nothing they could say could ever make things whole again.

Things go on that way, with perhaps a let-up here and there, but without end. There must be a solution somewhere. You can't go on living through a series of climaxes, some sessions cold and bitter, some furious in their intensity. A respite means only the gathering of forces for a new skirmish. There is no end.

"You can write this in large bold letters," Dale said. "I'm not going to change. We might as well be clear on that. I'll never swear eternal faithfulness. I don't believe in it. You won't find happiness by forcing me to do something that isn't part of me."

"Happiness? I don't expect happiness, any more. Ever. I'd like to lapse into some neutral condition slightly removed from complete misery."

"I wouldn't give up smoking," he said, relentlessly, "no matter what arguments you might find."

"No, nor gambling, nor cold showers. I don't care about all that. This is one thing. One intimate thing. I didn't want to tread on your personal liberties. I know how important they are to you. Free, free, you worship your freedom so that you make yourself a slave to it. I wouldn't dare disturb that, except that here it happens that *I* am concerned too. I won't have you trampling on *my* rights."

"Actually, when you come down to cases, I've deprived you of nothing. You want to be hurt about it. Very well. You wouldn't object if I were away, playing bridge. No. You've set your mind in a certain direction, and nothing will ever change it. You react in the bourgeois manner to the series of sermons that's been pounded into you through the years. Thou shalt not commit adultery. Nobody ever thought of standing up and shouting, why not? Well, I'm shouting it now. Why not? I don't go by the old-line adages. I've grown up. I can make my own rules. Things are different these days. Life has been geared up a notch. Stream-lined. We take our pleasures and run. Frankly, I don't see anything wrong about it. I rather like it."

"Words, words," she said, bitterly. "You still think you can prove a point by talking it to death."

"It's all good clear common sense. You want to close your ears to anything that sounds moderately sane."

"Go ahead. Take my emotions apart and explain the way they ought to work. You might as well tell me how delicious snails are, bubbling over with vitamins and calories. I still won't eat them."

"You weren't listening to me, by any chance? I often wonder why a man ever takes the trouble to explain any-

thing to a woman. The more unassailable his logic, the more ridiculous her answers. What are we getting at? Anything? It started with Betty Lou. Now we're up to snails. I wanted to work around to something. May I?"

"Yes," she said, feeling her heart go cold. "I want you to." As long as it was the end, it might as well come now, in one of their calmer moments. And it was the end. You could tell from his precise, calculating manner.

"In barbarous countries," he said, slowly, measuring his words as if he were building up a scene, "a man can get a divorce from his wife for twenty-five cents. That's what makes it barbarous. The fact that it costs that much. We try a noble experiment and it fails. Why can't we shake hands and go our ways?"

She couldn't face him. It was what she wanted, she knew, and still it left her surprisingly miserable. "Go ahead," she said, her voice low.

"We were married in a silly moment. We had our moonlight, and a car, and a passing whim. Maybe it wasn't exactly that. I don't know. It seemed all right at the time. But we never meant too much to each other. I know your feelings for me. I don't want a person cringing when I approach. It was that way, right from the start. Sometimes you tried to hide it. Sometimes you didn't even go to that trouble. I'm not going through life with a wife who sleeps on the edge of the bed. We're both too intelligent for that. We haven't clicked. Now we recognize it. Why can't civilization do as much and say, bless you, children, go find your happiness elsewhere? No. There are rules and regulations to be followed. Well, why not? We miss out all along the line. You won't tolerate this in me, and I find several important qualities missing in you. Give it a title. Incompatibility. All right. Why go on, then?"

"I don't know," she said, dully, wondering at the pain in her heart. "I don't know."

"I want to be free," he said, bluntly. "I don't want the burdens of married life. I wasn't made for it. You were right. I'm a slave to freedom. I want to go on that way. I don't want any ties."

She got up as though she were an old woman. "Very well. Do what you wish. Make whatever arrangements are necessary. I'm not very good at that sort of thing."

"It's as much for you as it is for me. I have nobody I want to run to. Nobody in particular, that is. You can turn neatly to the arms of your Neolithic man."

She took a step toward him, her eyes blazing. "That's enough of that," she said, her voice trembling. "You don't have to be cheap."

"Oho," he said, with new interest, "so I hit on something. Shooting in the dark, and I hit a bull's-eye. I thought there was more to this than met the eye. You! The paragon of virtue, throwing a lovely ladylike fit when I as much as mentioned another girl's name. Well. Tell me. Tell me all. This should be good."

"Stop it," she said, unable to control her anger. "You've done enough to me. There are some things I won't tolerate."

"No," he said, sweetly. "Naturally. Not if they concern you. Well. So I've lost out to a mass of muscles. That should help my ego in the years to come. I hope you'll be very happy, my dear, bouncing a basketball merrily up and down your bedroom." He stepped toward her and put an affectionate hand mockingly on her shoulder.

She swept it away with a quick furious motion. "Get away from me," she cried, hysterically. "Get away from me." She faced him, her cheeks burning. "Let me alone.

Get out of here. Go away somewhere and be—be brilliant.” He shrugged his shoulders and smiled uncertainly and went out of the room. She let herself sink into the easy-chair and buried her head in her arms, trying to control the sobs that she knew would follow her outburst, and then, not succeeding, letting them pour from her heart as if that might ease the pain.

CHAPTER 3

HANK came back to his barren store early Tuesday morning. The worthless check, returned by the bank, lay in an otherwise unimportant pile of mail on the floor. Hank opened the envelope and stared at the check, wondering what could have happened. Whatever it was, it wasn't good. Baxter had done something, and he didn't like to think what it might be. Could he have sold everything in the store and taken a phony check? It wasn't possible. Perhaps he had slipped a bit but he wasn't that bad. Athletic Association. No such account. What did it mean? He got up and went through the store. There was almost nothing left on the shelves, and the store-room was virtually empty. Could burglars have broken in over the weekend? That wasn't likely, the way the place was locked and bolted. And then there was the bad check.

He was surprised at the sick feeling it gave him. Even if the worst of his suspicions were true, it involved only worldly goods, not life and death and flesh and bone. Still it went deep down to his insides and left him with an empty feeling. Bah. He shook his head, annoyed. Come out of it, Brady. There are so many troubles in this world, greater than yours by far. Think how a young soldier must feel, tough and strong and full of life, watching an enemy tank plough relentlessly toward him, lifting his impotent rifle and knowing that there was no hope, no hope

for living, never another day, never to see the sunshine or his loved ones again . . . It wouldn't work. Sure there were other things in all the world, troubles more heart-rending, wars and death and starvation, but this was happening to him, the bottom falling out of his life, and his futile attempt at logic couldn't quiet the violent disturbance that kept surging inside of him.

It wasn't only the money. It was part of his life, something he had built and nursed and brought to maturity, something that was his own, and now to all appearances it was gone. But he might be wrong. There was an explanation somewhere, and he might as well wait until Baxter got in before deciding that he was plunged into ruin. Baxter and his jinx. Maybe there was more to that jinx story than he cared to believe. It's this way. You're getting along nicely, not ready to retire but still a long ways from bankruptcy, and then the miseries of an aching world catch up with you. It's scant consolation to know that others are suffering too. This is you and here and now, and Brady's troubles happen to mean more to you than any others that you can call to mind just now. But of course it might be all right. He would know soon enough.

Then Baxter arrived, bright, confident, hand outstretched in triumph, ready for the accolade of his grateful employer. Hank shook hands, cautious, worried, and handed him the check before Baxter could tell him about his big deal. There was a long tense moment. Then Baxter said, upset, "What is it, Hank? They must have the money."

"There's no such account. Good God. Don't tell me you sold all our stuff on a bum check."

Baxter passed his hand across his forehead. "There's some mistake somewhere. This fellow is a pal of yours. He played on your team. What's his name again?" He

searched frantically for the calling card. "Here it is," he said, eagerly, as if it could help. "Parker Elliot. Said he always bought stuff from you. Every year. It must be all right. It must be."

Hank tried to shake the pounding out of his head. "Never heard of him. What happened?"

Baxter told him the story, blending his excitement with the misery that was beginning to grip him.

"No such thing," Hank said, despondently. "You let him get away with that. Good God! How in hell did he know about Carnegie Tech? Oh. That clipping. Probably been in here before. What did he look like?"

Baxter tried to describe him. "Big fellow, about thirty, or thirty-five, much heavier than you, wore a slouch hat. I don't remember, Hank. There was so much happening. How could I tell?" He took off his glasses and wiped them, rubbing his eyes with trembling fingers. "I've done it," he said, in a low voice. "I've done it. Again."

"How did he know I was away? Did you go blabbing it to every customer that came into the store? He must have known. What did he do with the stuff? Did you get the license number of the truck? God. Were you asleep or awake? Couldn't you check up in some way? Credentials, or something. Did you have to go hook, line and sinker for the first crook that tried to spring something on you?"

Baxter sank lower and lower, pulling himself into his shell, shrinking before Hank until he seemed smaller, thinner, older. "I'm sorry, Hank," he whimpered. "I was trying to do something for you. I didn't blab. Might have mentioned it to a few people. You know how they are. Where's Brady, friendly, most of them, and you have to give them some sort of answer. Anybody might have been

fooled. This fellow, with his printed card, and a signed check, and he seemed to know you. I couldn't tell, could I?"

"Printed card. You can get all you want at any cheap print shop for a buck. Check too. Christ. What trouble people can go to when they want to be crooked." He walked around the store slowly, as if to survey the havoc. "Didn't leave much, did he?" he asked, with a bitter grin. "Boy oh boy. A neat clean-up if I ever saw one."

Baxter walked beside him like a timid shadow. "I've done it," he said, brokenly. "I've done it again." He put his timid hand on Hank's arm. "I can do it to anybody," he said, his voice rising hysterically. "I'm a real champ when I get started." He stopped suddenly and buried his face in his hands, shaking as if he were going to be ill.

Hank looked at him, his anger melting into pity. "Take it easy, Bax," he said, gently. "Better get along home. Drop back tomorrow. I want to go over things." He shook his head mournfully. "I don't know. Maybe there won't be any tomorrow for us."

He sat over his books and bills for a long time. It was no use. He had been in only fair shape before, and this was the crusher. You can add and subtract all you please, but once you have the answer the rest is just the foolish hope that your figures might be wrong. And you know they aren't. That means the end. You can sell the fixtures for what they will bring, and perhaps your good will, and then pay your creditors what you can, and owe the rest of it to them, and work it off, some way or other, for the next few years. What else can you do? You can't stock up again, trying to start over. You've been stretching your credit as it is, and they won't stand for an additional line at this time. No use kidding yourself. That's the way it is. The

end. He looked up toward the front of the store, tenderly. This was the time of the day when the sun's rays hit the gilt lettering on the window, scattering the shadows in grotesque figures on the floor and counter. Hank Brady, Sports. There you are, mister, spread on the floor and walls like milk scattered from a broken bottle. They'll never put the pieces together again. Never.

He got up, weary. Eight years ago he had started making the rounds, his hat in his hand. I need a job, mister. Any sort of job. He was young then, young and strong. Now he was thirty. Old? Well, not as young as he used to be. And he hadn't gotten anywhere then. What chance did he have now? What can you do, young fellow? Well, they told me at Carnegie Tech that I was an engineer, but I haven't ever done any engineering. I've been a football player, and a basketball player too, but I don't suppose you need any of those around an office, do you? Even if you did, even if somebody were getting together an all-star team, the way Obie Smythe did then, they'd want the younger kids, not an old has-been of thirty. Maybe he'd get away from it all. There was still something tugging at a remote corner of his consciousness. Something he wanted to do. Hank Brady, leader of men. There was an old call coming back to him, and somehow it tied in with the little mining town where he had spent the early part of his life. Rhodora, Pennsylvania. Maybe he could work something out of the mess that would keep it from being a total loss. Just now he wasn't sure.

Baxter had the cracker-jar in his hands when Martha came home. She looked at him in surprise. "Early to-day?" she said. "Hank back?" She pointed an admonishing finger at the jar. "Uh uh. Mustn't." Then she shook her head, displeased at her new coyness. "How to be cute

though decrepit. What I meant to imply was, lay off. Unless you're merely counting."

He tried to keep his head up but the effort was too great. He moved his lips before he spoke, as if trying to form his phrases. "Leave it to me," he said, finally, in a low empty voice. "I managed to do it, all right. I can drag my jinx in any old place. I can do it if nobody else can." He sat down, his shoulders slipping forward, slipping, slipping.

"What is it, Bax?" she said, frightened, then, louder, "What is it? What's happened?"

"When I get going I don't fool around. I can ruin the best of them. It's Hank," he said, brokenly. "I've done it to Hank."

"No." Her voice rose in her agitation. "You didn't. It's ridiculous. You put over that fine sale Saturday. What could have gone wrong since?" But it was no use. If he said it happened, it must have. "We've been through this before, haven't we? What is it? Fire, flood, or pestilence? What difference does it make? We get it one way or another, don't we? The Cunningham Trio. Martha, Baxter, and dear old Jinx." Her head dropped, her spirit broken. "Go ahead. Tell me."

"The sale. It was a phony," he said, each word adding to his pain. "The check was no good. It was all an act. I had to fall for that." He turned to her, appealing, tears in his eyes. "It seemed so real. Honest, Martha. The printed card, and the check, and he said he knew Hank, and everything. Even when I told you about it, didn't it seem all right then?"

She put her hand to her whirling head. "I don't know. How bad is it? I suppose you're fired."

"Worse than that. Hank is licked. He'll have to close up."

She sat down and started to cry, softly at first, then

with full heart-breaking sobs that she couldn't control. He got up and put his hand on her shoulder. "I can't bear it," she said. "I can't bear it." She tried to dry her eyes with her hands but the tears kept coming. "I'm not strong any more."

"Martha," he said. "Martha."

They were never going to touch that cracker-jar. Not for food, or for clothes, or for illness or even death. That was the baby fund, and it was to be used for nothing in God's world but their baby. It had moved along so nicely, an even shiny ten-spot finding its unerring way there week after week, and so often she would take them out and count them, as if she didn't know exactly how many there were, but it gave her a feeling of importance, of conquest. Martha Cunningham was going to have her baby. Every bill made it that much surer. It was weeks ago that they were waiting anxiously for it to reach fifty, so they would know they were on their way. Fifty. That was fine. Then one hundred was the next goal. One hundred dollars! That would pay all the bills. You couldn't miss with a hundred dollars. And last week they'd passed that. Next stop, one hundred and fifty. At the rate they were going that would be a cinch. Then two hundred. But it didn't matter, because once they passed the hundred mark they were in. Nothing would ever take her baby from her. Nothing.

She took his handkerchief from his breast pocket and rubbed her face and eyes. Then she blew her nose and rubbed her eyes again. Her face was red and puffy. "What were you doing with that money?" she asked, suspiciously.

"Hank," he said, unhappily. "I have to offer it to him, don't I? It's the least I can do."

She looked at him emptily. That was what happened to lives, old or new. You carry them carefully in your eager

hands, nursing them, breathing gently on them, and then you slip, ever so slightly, and they crack wide open, and that is the end, for nothing can ever make them new again, tears or vows or anything. "O. K.," she said, swallowing hard, and wondering why the pain should be so great.

Strange how things come back to you. Hank was sixteen or seventeen years old at the time, and the women were rushing from house to house, spreading the welcome news. They're taking on men at Rhodora. His father had been out of work for almost three months, that last time, and then things picked up suddenly, for some reason that they never could understand, and back to the mines he went, happy at the chance of providing for his family again. Not you, Hank, he had said, although Hank was bigger than most of the young fellows in town. No son of mine is going into the mines. Good old Dad. He worked his life away, to protect a son almost as big and strong as himself. He must have known, or suspected, that his lungs weren't equal to the task imposed on them, and still he waited restlessly for the day when he could get back under the ground. Work at Rhodora! He bustled around the house, eager, happy, smiling, acting as if it weren't his death sentence. This was going to be a long steady shift, they said, but of course Dad didn't get his share of it, because after a few months he had to quit, berating himself for his weakness and assuring them that he would return in a day, or two, or three. But he never went back. His lungs were gone, and he died in about a month, confident to the end that he would shake off his illness, that he would soon be back in the mines, that you couldn't keep a man as big and powerful as he was down for long.

The next year Hank went to college, helped by his ath-

letic scholarship, and after graduation he struggled in and near New York for years, making only occasional visits to the place that was an important part of him. Just as the soil calls to a son of the soil, so the little mining town must be calling him back. There was unfinished business there, somewhere, and for a long time he had suspected that some day he was going to return. Why not now? What was keeping him? He'd always been a hero in his home town, some of the stores still displaying newspaper headlines featuring the name of Brady. Hank Brady, of Rhodora. Elsewhere he might be a bust, but they knew him in Rhodora. There was a strange feeling running through him, something he didn't understand, but underneath it all the same thought kept recurring. Perhaps he was going home.

CHAPTER 4

BETTY LOU sat propped up in the spotless white bed. Bandages covered the lower part of her face, hiding half of her mouth and the entire left side of her chin. "It's a week," she said. "A whole week. I'm strong as a horse." She had to speak out of the side of her mouth. "When are they going to let me out of here?"

"Soon," Obie said, soothingly. "They say you're fine. It's just that that cut needs steady treatment."

"Hand me my purse, will you?"

He took a slow step toward the dresser. "What do you want, sweet? I'll get it for you."

"Just my purse."

He gave it to her hesitantly. She went through its contents with fumbling fingers. "Your mirror," he said. "You're looking for that mirror again."

"You took it," she said, petulantly. "You're just hiding it from me."

"It must have fallen out. I meant to get you another one but I always forget."

"I know," she said, softly. "The nurse always forgets to bring one in when I ask her. You don't have to tell me. I have feelings."

"There's nothing you can see. Only bandages. You look like an Egyptian mummy, with beautiful eyes." He bent over and kissed her forehead.

"Obie. Stay here and talk to me. Tell me about your mother."

He tapped his heel against the chair, slowly, rhythmically. "What about?"

"Just—everything. Did you telephone her?"

"Last night," he said, eagerly. "She wants to know how you're getting along. Just as if—as if she knew you. I told her how swell you were."

"How is she? How's her health?"

"Not so bad. Getting old, I guess. Next week we'll go down there. She says it's about time she had a little sunshine in her life. You're going to stay there a few weeks. It's what both of you need."

"Obie. Tell me about them. About her and your Dad." She giggled, like a child expecting her favorite story. "About the goose-grease."

"Oh. You're just like a kid. I told you that yesterday and the day before."

"I like to hear it."

He looked at her for a long time. "Well," he said, slowly, "it's like I told you. Dad used to rub this goose-grease in his hair. Some neighbor told him it would keep his hair from falling out. Mom would throw a fit. Got the whole house smelling like a Greek restaurant, she'd say. One more dose of that goose-grease and out I go. She meant it too. Couldn't stand the stuff. Dad looked at her sheepishly. You'd leave me anyhow, he said, if I got bald. She put her hands on her hips and laughed till she cried. Samuel Smythe, she said, I never robbed you from no moving picture company. You got lots of good qualities but beauty ain't one of them. I'd rather have you homely than stinking."

"He lost his hair anyhow," she said, smiling with her eyes.

"Every bit of it. Goose-grease or no." He ran his hand through his thinning hair. "Like me. Only he was worse. I never tried goose-grease. I wonder if it would help."

"Don't. I like it the way it is. There's something nice about things staying the way they are."

"Rest a while, sweet."

She lay back and closed her eyes. "Talk to me. I don't get frightened, as long as you talk to me."

He put his hand over hers, and watched her with a heavy heart. Tomorrow they were going to operate. She didn't even know. It's not serious, the surgeon had said, and it'll be a crime if we don't do it. Otherwise she'll have an ugly scar for life. But plastic work, they were doing wonders with it these days, and they could fix her up so that it would scarcely show. Poor kid. She couldn't have overheard. They didn't want her to know. Tomorrow they would give her a hypo to put her to sleep, and make their preparations afterwards. It was a slow painful job, and maybe he was doing the wrong thing by letting them do it. Her parents hadn't been told. He had assumed full responsibility. Fiancé, he said, when they asked his relationship. He wasn't sure that that was so. She was a young kid, and maybe her ideas were different. Maybe she just looked upon him as a family friend, almost a father. That was one of the things he would have to discover, afterwards. Strange how she was on edge today, as if she knew that something was in the wind. Stories, stories, all day long. And if he stopped for a moment she was at him again. It didn't matter. The same thing, over and over. And all about his family. Nobody had asked him about his family before. Most people didn't suspect that he had a mother. Nobody cared. Nobody but Betty Lou. She was sweet. He could feel his heart go out to her. Poor kid. She was going through an awful siege,

and he couldn't help wondering how it would all come out.

"Well?" she said, not opening her eyes.

"I thought you were falling asleep. I didn't want to talk."

"Go ahead. I want you to."

"Well," he said, "I was telling you yesterday how broken up Mom was when Dad died. She was the strong one, though. He couldn't have lasted a year without her. Never did a thing without getting her advice. What socks to wear, what medicine to take, and what time to go to sleep. She managed his whole life and he loved it. She babied him. Kidded him along. It broke her up terribly when he passed on. She was like a lost soul. Nobody to do things for. That's worse than not having anybody to do them for you. She used to go down to the cemetery every day and fuss around his grave, putting bits of flowers here and there, and scraping away sand that might have blown on it. Still doing things for Dad. Well, she was worried about his being lonely. He was off in a new corner of the cemetery, away from the other graves. Then one day a neighbor died, a Mr. Carr, and they buried him in the next plot. She felt better then. Not that your Dad got along any too well with him, she told us. He talked a blue streak, alive or dead. Well, she said, I never did hear of anybody talking the ear off a corpse, but if it can be done Gran'pa Carr's the one to do it." He stopped, noting her soft even breathing.

"I'm not asleep," she said, after a while.

"My stories," he said, deprecatingly. "They'll be giving me a job on the radio soon. Bedtime stories by Uncle Obediah."

"I want to hear them. I like to think about them. Otherwise I'd be thinking about myself."

"There's nothing to worry about. I've told you that. Nothing."

She turned her head suddenly, then winced at a sharp twinge of pain. "Obie," she said, frightened, "tell me. I want to know. I have a right to know. How will I look?" She closed her eyes against a horrible image.

"Fine," he said, trying to sound sincere. "Fine. It's nothing. Nothing. Only a scratch. In a couple of weeks you won't even know it's there."

"Oh, God," she breathed. She was silent for a long while. Then she pressed his fingers. "Tell me about the picnic," she said, bravely, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hand. "Tell me about the time they ran out of gas."

CHAPTER 5

HEAR ye, hear ye, the clerk of the court kept saying, hear ye, hear ye, in time with the rumbling of the wheels that ground into Connie's consciousness. She shouldn't have taken the sleeper from Chicago. But the day coach would have been just as bad, and here at least she could make the vague attempt at sleep that she knew would never come. She reached for the light switch just over her head and turned it. Three-thirty. God, how the minutes creep. It seemed hours since the last time she'd glanced at her watch, and then it had said three-ten. She wouldn't look again, not until she was certain that an hour had passed, a whole hour, so that it would be at least four-thirty. She might even doze in the meantime, and awaken suddenly, startled, to find that it was broad daylight. She picked up her magazine and read for a while, knowing that the words before her made no impression, knowing that the sudden rush of events of the last few days was crowding all else from her troubled mind.

At least they had parted without acrimony. It was nice to know that. Dale's faults were only what she could have expected, knowing him as she did. But he wanted his freedom, and she supposed that she wanted hers. And now she had it. Those things work out so easily, if you know the right people and can afford to pay the ridiculous fees. Dale found a smart lawyer who specialized in things of

that sort, who knew the proper approach in Illinois, and they managed to arrange a phony residence there, back-dated as the law apparently required, and a few well-trained witnesses, and a complacent judge, and everything went off like clock-work, the bald lies and the bare-faced fakery of it all amazing and hurting her.

"Your name?" they asked the cocky swaggering witness.

"Edward P. Everett."

"Occupation?"

"Accountant."

"Tell us in your own words and so forth and so forth on that Sunday morning and so forth."

"Well, I called on Constance and Dale this Sunday morning and she was getting breakfast ready and it seems she burned the toast and he took it out of the toaster and he said Goddam it to hell what the hell kind of breakfast is this to serve a man and she said Oh go fly a kite, and he threw the toast at her and she said, You dirty rat, and he then took the toaster and threw that at her and it hit her in the face causing bruises and abrasions, and subjected her to other vile and indecent oaths . . ." But they had never heard of Edward P. Everett, accountant, before. Tell us, Edward, in your own words, which our clever lawyer had prepared and typed so neatly on four sheets of paper for you to commit to your perjured memory, and the good judge knows it, and he sits there like a baked owl and pretends that he is listening most seriously, to give his finest legal consideration, the old hypocrite with his decision already made.

So said Constance and said Dale did do such and such, and said Dale did hurl said toaster at said Constance, striking her on said nose, and said Dale did use shocking

and obscene language. He said damme, he said damme, oh the monster overbearing. But judge, it's too ridiculous, we did no such thing, Dale never swore at me, never threw toast or toaster at me in all our days, it was something entirely different, some strange sort of incompatibility that you probably wouldn't understand, you with your phony witnesses and cooked-up testimony. But that was what they wanted, in this lovely civilized country. "In Artichokia," Dale had said, "a couple seeking divorce must stand on their heads and whistle Ave Maria backwards. They're crazy there. We're sane. We go through this."

She put her magazine aside and snapped out the light. She lay there, eyes wide open in the darkness, knowing that sleep was impossible. It was dirty, the whole proceeding, and you couldn't come out of it clean. At first you want nothing as much as a cold shower, and then you know that something is clinging to you that soap and running water can never wash away. It might help, that was all, fresh biting water stinging your head and chest and rushing down your body to your feet, cold clear water purging you and trying desperately to remove the stain that you know is part of you now. Martha had always said that a cold shower was the Rawlings cure-all. She'd have to take many of them, morning and night, to help her this time.

At least she was free. It wasn't what she wanted. Something basic had gone awry. Years ago she would have said, there will be only one man in all life for me. Years ago, yes, and last year too. There are things you can't accept too easily, you and your long line of virgin grandmothers. A broken marriage was unheard of, to them. One man and only one, through thick and thin, and come what may. Death, or despair, or dishonor, one man,

only one. Divorce! That would have set them back on their heels. Not our family. We've been through a lot, but never that. Very well, dear ancestors, somebody has to start the ball a-rolling, and it looks as if little Connie was picked by Fate for the job. Not that we relish it, girls. We're as upset as you are about the whole thing. But what can you do when a situation is dumped into your lap and there's only one solution? You can't sit with a ghost rattling around in your arms, waiting for welcome death to remove you from your misery. You can't, can you? Be fair, now.

It's still dirty. Perhaps it was the way they did it. There must be better ways of ending things. Marriage is so full of lovely vows, all eager, all poetic, a beautiful blending of words that roll liltingly from the tongue; love, and honor, and cherish, till death do us part. Why can't they mould the separation into a setting just as tender, tinged perhaps with sorrow for the failure of the past, but sprayed with a slight rosy glow for the hope that the future should bring? True, you've made a mistake. There's no crime there. Why clothe it in filth, in perjured words and acts, all taken down in neat short-hand notes in the presence of a sour judge who knows the answer before the participants step into the room?

And I say to you, Constance Rawlings Edwin, and to you, Dale Edwin, having reviewed the testimony presented herewith by competent witnesses, I do hereby grant you a decree of divorce and so forth and so forth and may God have mercy on your souls. No, that was for a death sentence, but sometimes he probably got mixed up and doled it out to the miserable couples who were looking to him for deliverance. Dale had shaken hands with her, gallant to the end. "Well," he said, "that's that."

"So long," she said. "Good luck. Honestly."

"I know you mean it. I always said you were a good kid. Got your ticket back? I'm going to fly. I don't know why. I'm not even in a hurry. Well. We'll be seeing each other, won't we?"

"Sometimes, perhaps." If only the trembling would leave her body.

"I admit my error," he said, dolefully. "I shouldn't have thrown that toaster."

"It's strange," she said. "If we'd told the truth they'd have tossed us out of court."

"Well, at least it's over. No hard feelings. We are what we are. I don't say you're right or that I'm wrong. We have our own ideas and they don't harmonize. I think we've done the sensible thing. So long, Connie. You deserve lots of happiness and I hope you get it."

"Thanks," she said, turning away and wanting to cry.

Then that was the end of that, and now they were legally separated, each free to go his own way and do the things that a married person should be able to do but somehow can't. Freedom. It's a funny word, and somehow doesn't seem to fit into the picture.

She could stay with Martha for a while, now that she had no place of her own. Until she got her bearings. Maybe Dale would return some of her furniture. Most of it had been thrown away. Junk. The things she had picked with loving care, had moulded into a neat and livable home, tossed into discard because Dale had suddenly prospered and everything they had before his new wealth had become old and ugly. Perhaps that was what happened to their love, because that would never come back either. But the other things had been hers, hers alone, and he had no right to throw them away. Now she would

have to start over again, making her careful purchases for a new home. Later on, perhaps, when she was more in the mood. These next few weeks she just wanted to relax, to do nothing until she could proceed with a clearer mind.

Martha would take her this time, knowing that Connie had no other place to go, and in that way she could do her little part toward keeping the cracker-jar fund going until Baxter found another job. Martha was pretty upset about it all. "Everything coming at once," she said. "Although it's just about what I'd expect, life being what it is."

"If you were feather-brained, the way I am," Connie had asked, "what would you do? What would you do if you weren't?"

"Advice," Martha had said. "I'm a fine one to be handing out advice. Look at the great success *I've* made of life."

"You're doing all right, holding both of you together in the face of all that's hit you."

"Great," Martha had said, bitterly. "Wonderful. You'll find it all in my autobiography. How to be happy though miserable."

Connie had put her hand on Martha's. "Don't. We've gone through a lot without getting bitter. Let's hang on."

Martha brushed back her hair with a despairing hand. "We're doomed. Doomed. There must be some Rawlings curse. I thought you had overcome it when Dale stumbled into that young fortune. You *would* go and leave it. You're running true to character. Go ahead. Follow the dictates of your heart, even if it lands you in the gutter. I can't tell you anything."

"I'm not making a decision. It's all been made. We agree that we want our freedom. What else is there to do?"

"Nothing," Martha said, intently. "Maybe we're a couple of old prudes. I don't know. I feel as you do. If a man is mine he's going to be all mine. I wouldn't stand for anything else. Maybe it's a Rawlings trait, and I still don't pretend to know if it's good or bad, but I'm with you, Connie, all the way."

Connie drew herself up and met Martha's determined gaze. "O. K. That's the answer."

There was no question about it, then. She knew that, lying there in the darkness, listening to the wearying rumbling of the train. It doesn't do any good to review things, going over and over them in your mind, but it helps the crawling of time. Slowly, so slowly. That hour must have passed by now. She'd wait, just to make sure. Wait, and try not to think. Visualize the slowly creeping second hand of the watch, moving in its interminable circle. Once around. Delay a bit, to get it off to a good start on the second round. You do that, foolishly, five times, and that should be five long minutes, actually, nearer ten, because you certainly did give that hand plenty of leeway. Now you reach for the light-switch, slowly, slowly, pretending for a full minute that you can't find it. Now keep your eyes closed against the sudden glare of light. Another minute. It was ridiculous. Whatever time it was, that was what it was. Being a bit silly about it wasn't going to change things. She looked boldly at the watch. Five after four. It wasn't possible. She'd hoped it would be at least five o'clock. She let a weary sigh of disappointment escape her, and felt that it would be nice to cry, a long heart-clearing cry, and after it was over she could look at the time again, and this time it might really be five, or even five-thirty.

This was going to go on for a long time, not only to-

night, but other nights, and days, and weeks, and months. She was going to be a slave to a dial with frightening numbers on it, hoping, wishing, praying for time to pass, and while she waited she would recall the things that were ugliest in her life, so that she could live them over and over again and go through the same suffering again, only more slowly this time, as if a slow-motion camera had caught it and was doling it back to her in agonizing detail. It had her entrapped, encircled, and she was never going to get away from it, never. Now that she was free . . . Free . . .

CHAPTER 6

CONNIE'S eyes roamed unhappily about the empty store, then returned to the cover of her manuscript, staring at it as if it were the writing on her tombstone. "You don't want to publish a book of poems, do you?" she asked, mournfully. "Everything seems to crack at the same time. This might have been some trifling solace. *Sonnets at Sunset*, by Constance Gwynn Rawlings. Including a few poems never published before. Meaning, of course, that no magazine would accept them. Well, there they are. For the grandchildren to laugh at. Queer duck, grandma, she wrote the funniest stuff, some of it, they do say, making sense." She forced herself to look away from the dark yawning spaces in the rear, trying to act as if her heart weren't being scattered to pieces inside of her. "So you're really giving up."

Hank spread his big hands. "What else can I do? I've figured and figured, but it's no go. It may be fine to bare your chest to the storm, or whatever it is the martyrs do in your sonnets, but creditors don't go in for poetry either." He tried to hide the pain in his eyes. "Perhaps I'm better off. There are things I want to do. Things I was getting farther and farther away from. Maybe this will bring me back to life."

"It's like losing part of you," she said. "Part of your body. I've been so miserable about it. And it doesn't help me to realize that it was my fault."

"*Your* fault?"

"I got you into this. Knowing me, I mean, and my telling you about Bax. It isn't so far-fetched. I know you did it as much for me as for Baxter."

"It isn't so," he said, in a low voice. "I was thinking of humanity. I imagine that was my feeling at the time. I'm not sure. I've never analyzed it too clearly. Anyhow, it's all a sequence of events. You might as well blame the motorman of the subway that brought the crooks to my neighborhood. You have enough of your own troubles. Don't try to take on a few of mine."

"My troubles? Pooh. I'm glamour girl number seven. Me with my weeds sticking out of my ears. I'm on my way to the primrose path. Yippee!" She smiled wanly, shaking her head. "Yippee," she repeated, softly, pathetically. "See? It doesn't come off. I still miss on a couple of cylinders."

He stood there, looking at her, feeling his whole heart go out to her. They had something for each other, and now she was free. Free, and he had nothing to offer her, nothing but a pair of empty hands. Big hands, strong hands, but empty. It wouldn't work out. She'd had too much of struggle, and he wasn't going to add to her burdens. Besides, he was going away. He'd made up his mind. Back to Rhodora, back to his own people, to help if he could, starting at the age of thirty where he should have been at twenty, arriving somewhere (where, where?) as that needed leader of men a scant ten years later than planned. Ten years. What difference did it make? Things don't change in ten years, or in a lifetime. Humanity was suffering, had suffered and struggled, centuries before he was born, and would go on suffering through the years to come. He was no great benefactor, leading man-

kind from its maze of troubles. No. He just wanted to be an ordinary human being, one of the boys, helping the few that might be thrown into his path. But it wouldn't be helping Connie. It would be dragging her down, down, and she deserved more from life than that.

She stood near one of the large bare walls. "You had that lovely exerciser here. I was going to come down some day and work off my middle-age spread."

"Your spread. You have a long way to go. Just now you seem ready to fall apart. What do you weigh?"

"One hundred and four."

"Too thin. We'll have to build you up. Eat more of the things they plug on the radio programs." But of course he wouldn't be here to help her. "It was nice of you to come," he said, hesitantly.

"I'm always visiting this place to tell you that I'm married, or divorced, or something. I don't know what I'll do when it's gone."

"Somebody'll be here. A restaurant, maybe, or a liquor store. Just drop in and tell the proprietor your troubles." He pushed his thick hair back with a weary hand. "It won't be the same, will it, Connie?"

She shook her head, not meeting his eyes. "You know it won't." She took a few steps, away from him. "Funny, how we've slipped, somewhere, and we can't put our fingers on it. You'd think we'd committed some sort of crime, and were accepting this as retribution. We haven't done anything, have we?"

"Sure we have. We're part of the human race. The wrong part. The suffering part. Things are dumped on us, like bombs falling on innocent women and children. We're not even supposed to ask reasons. Just accept it, as if it were fate. It's all part of something I'm trying to get

my fingers on. I'm not quite sure of it yet. I'm groping, like a miner in the dark, and I haven't hit on any solution yet. But I'm starting to ask why. That's progress, isn't it?"

"If it's any solace, you might as well think so. I don't know. I'd like to find a bit of happiness, right here in my palm, so that I can close my fingers on it and know it's there." She weighed the manuscript of her unpublished poems in her hand. "I don't know what to do with these. Burn them or frame them. They're getting heavier and heavier, like an albatross around my neck."

"Let me read them," he said, eagerly. "I don't know a damned thing about poetry. I don't even know what I like. I've read 'Invictus' and some of Robert Service. It's about time I started getting down to better things."

"Not with Rawlings you won't. Poems of passion written in lukewarm ink. But I'd like you to read them." She handed the papers to him. "Tell me what you think of them."

"It isn't that so much. It'll give me an excuse to see you again. To talk to you again."

"As if you needed that." She started for the door. "Well, anyhow, we can tell people that it was our poetry that brought us together."

Dale walked into Obie's office, slowly, as if facing an ordeal. He nodded, as he always did, then picked up some manuscripts in his customary detached manner, glancing at them and tossing them back on the desk. "How is she getting along?" he asked, after a while.

Obie looked at him, looked right through him. "O. K.," he said, reluctantly. There was an uncomfortable pause. "One thing I'll say for you. You got a wonderful doctor."

"Best in the country."

"Don't think I don't appreciate that. She looks fine. I wouldn't have believed it possible. He did a marvelous job. You can see marks here and there, but they're not bad. Won't ruin a girl's life."

Dale got up and walked around the little room, restless. "I'm not a terrible person," he said, as if he were telling his side of the story to a jury. "You know that. It was just unfortunate. If I did anything wrong it was in going out with Betty Lou. What happened after that didn't increase my crime. It's like slapping your pal on the back and having him fall over dead. You're not a murderer. You're a slapper. That's the way it was. We had an accident. It turned out horribly. But that doesn't make me worse than I was before." He stopped his nervous walking and turned to Obie. "Listen, Obie. You have some sense. You understand what I'm getting at, don't you?"

Obie nodded seriously. "I do. Honestly. If nothing else had happened I suppose I'd have been good and sore at you for trying to make Betty Lou, and you probably would have talked your way out of that. After all, I had no claims on her." He fussed with some papers on his desk. "What did that doctor charge?" he asked, suddenly.

"Two grand, for the whole works, assistants and everything. He did a good job, though, didn't he?"

"I suppose I ought to thank you."

"Cut it. We don't go in for that."

"I'm sorry you're digging into your money that way. Nothing is breaking for you. That play of yours is dead. No word from anybody."

"Up like a rocket and down like a stick." Dale drummed nervously on the desk. "I'm *not* down," he said, with more spirit. "I *can* write. Nobody can tell me I can't.

I'll have Horse Harkover begging for an Edwin play. I'll have the Hollywood producers standing in line. I'll do it, I tell you."

"In other words, you're going back to work."

He nodded, slowly. "I can do it. Back to work." He looked at Obie searchingly. "You're still handling me, aren't you?"

"If you want it."

"I'm afraid I'd go to pieces without you." He walked over and they shook hands. "You know me better than anybody. I'm full of faults, judging by ordinary standards. Why can't people say I'm not ordinary, and let it go at that? You understand me, though, from top to bottom. I'm not a terrible person, am I?"

"If you hurry a bit," Martha said, "I'll let you ride downtown with me." There was a strange light in her eyes. "I want to talk to you."

"What's up?" Connie asked. "I'm almost ready." She hurried through her final preparations. "They'll drop dead if they see me at the office before nine." They said good-bye to Baxter and went down the steps together.

"You wouldn't care to hazard any guesses, would you?" Martha asked.

"What's all the mystery? You're excited. You're frightened. You're glad, and you're sorry. Give me a few years and I'm sure I can figure it out."

"I'd picked today as the day I'd be certain. I picked it a week ago, and here it is."

"Well. That explains everything, except what you're talking about."

"Can't you tell? Look at me. I swear I can look in the mirror and know. I imagine everybody suspects. Even

you. It sticks out all over, emotionally if not physically. You'll see. Half the men in the subway will be offering me their seats."

"Martha!" Connie said, her heart jumping.

"Yes." Martha's eyes flashed in her excitement. "I'm going to have my baby! I am. I am. Nothing will stop me now. I should have done it long ago. When things were at their worst. That's the only time. Do you know when we decided? The night Bax came home and told me about Hank giving up the store. Common sense would have told us to wait. Sure. Sit back and wait, the way we did so many times before. Not now. Common sense has ruined too many lives. This time we're going to be crazy."

"What will you do?" Connie couldn't hide her anxiety. "What will you do? How will you manage?"

"I don't know. That's the hell of it. Maybe Baxter will land a swell job somewhere. This new responsibility might be just what he needs. Why must we think of all the awful things that could hit us? How about a few pleasant thoughts? I want my baby to be born with a smile on his face."

Connie could feel her shoulders sag. "Martha. I want to congratulate you. I want to tell you how happy I am, and I can't. Sure Baxter may get something wonderful. And then again he may not. Good God. You have to live. You can't bring a baby into the world and watch it starve."

"It won't starve. Don't you worry. We'll get along. We can borrow scraps of food from the neighbors. We'll sleep in hallways. We'll carry signs on our backs, Baby needs a job. We'll get along, I tell you. We'll be the first couple in history to have a baby on the cuff. But we'll have it. Nothing in God's world is going to stop me now." She looked at Connie's worried face and laughed. "It's not

as bad as all that. I figure at worst I can get a two or three months' leave of absence. One of the girls was out almost four months with a strep infection. They didn't fill her job. We all pitched in and helped. Why can't they do it for me? I can stay on till I get real big. What difference does it make? Nobody cares. They know I'm a respectable married woman. Of course they'll be at least mildly surprised. They probably assume I passed the reproductive age years ago. Old war-horse Cunningham having a baby. A baby! Can you imagine? All sorts of freaky things happen in an office."

Connie let her hand slip over Martha's shoulder, as if to protect her from the suffering that would surely be hers. "I hope it works out all right," she said, doubtfully.

"All right?" Martha's head went back a bit, staunch against an unyielding world. "How can it help being all right? I'm going to have my baby."

Betty Lou drummed impatiently on the board across the bed and glanced at her watch again. He wasn't late. Obie was never late. But this time she wanted him to be early. He came in softly, the way people do in hospitals, and tip-toed to her bed.

"Obie," she said, happily. "It seems so long when you're away."

"How are you, sweet?"

"Fine." She leaned forward, pressing her arms close to her body as if she were hugging herself. "They let me see it today," she said, the deep excitement making her voice waver. "I started crying. It was so much better than I could have expected. Oh, darling."

"It was a good job, wasn't it?"

She let her head drop, and stared at the bedclothes,

ready to cry again. "You're so good to me. You've done so much. I'll never forget it."

"Dale paid for it," he said, unhappily.

"It isn't that. The money isn't everything. It's *doing* it. Arranging things, and deciding, and getting it done. And you were so sweet, not telling me until it was over." She put her arms out to him, and he came closer to her.

"You're going down to Trenton for a few weeks," he said. "I want Mom to get to know you real well. And I want you to know her too. See if you think she'll make a good mother-in-law."

"She'll like me," she said, confidently. "I'm a home girl at heart. I ought to be fooling around a stove. I never would have been a great actress."

"You can come back to it, any time you want. I'm not going to be one of those husbands who won't let his wife have her career."

She shook her head. "I'd only be a flop. At least I might turn into a good cook."

"Anything you want, darling."

"I had my fling," she said, thoughtfully. "Most girls don't even get that. *I* had the lead in a play, didn't I? *I* had the lines, the big scenes." She lifted her head and straightened her body from its sitting position. "I gave it all I had, didn't I? You could hear a pin drop in that audience, and when I finished they clapped and cheered. I can still hear them. I think of it, over and over again, sitting here quietly, all alone. I may never do anything again, but I had something that night, didn't I? I was the leading lady." She let her hand pass over her bandages, slowly, reflectively, then threw her head back, proud, defiant. "There is no end, not for us, ever," she said, her voice low and vibrant. "Rise, rise, the night is behind us."

Her eyes were shining, her body leaning forward, eagerly, her hands poised before her. "See," she said, dramatically, losing herself in the scene, "there is light in the sky. A new day is dawning, a happier day. Another night, another day." She stopped, as if waiting for the curtain to fall, then sat back and looked at Obie.

He applauded gently. "Darling," he said, wondering at the tickling sensation around his eyes, "you were swell."

She smiled happily. "O. K.," she said, softly. "I don't care much what happens, now. I had my moment."

"I build up a reputation," Dale said, frowning. "Planet Pictures takes two of my plays, and then what happens? You go dead on me. There's nothing wrong with my play. It's the best thing I've done by far. Why in hell can't you do something with it?"

"After they reject it three times you regain permanent possession. Nobody wants it. How long do you think you can live on a Hollywood reputation?" Obie held the manuscript out to him as if it were repugnant. "Get going. Do something. Something new. Haven't you any thoughts, any ideas? Have you gone completely cold?"

"Harkover wouldn't consider it? Did he leave any loop-hole? Any hope? Couldn't you tell from the way he spoke?"

"He was brief and to the point. He said it stinks."

"Tell him to step away from the play," Dale said, coldly, "and see if the odor doesn't follow him wherever he goes."

"It wasn't only Harkover. The others might have been more polite, but the impression was about the same. We're flat now. There's a Cowboy Waffles story somewhere in the mail. That's all we have. You might as well start writing again."

"What for? To brush up on my typing?" Dale slammed the manuscript down on the desk. "What am I going to do with this? Hang it in an outhouse?"

Obie grinned. "That's the best offer I've had so far."

"I'll get going," Dale said, sullenly. "It isn't easy. Too many things have happened. You can't go through all that with a clear mind. I can see one thing. It's ten times as hard to work when you have money in the bank. You need an empty stomach. I'm still in the chips. But I'll get going. You'll see."

Obie scribbled on a pad before him. "How much money have you left, anyhow? I've been thinking of something."

"Oh, at least three thousand dollars."

"Three thousand! You mean you've spent fifteen thousand in these few months?"

"About. I never was good at figures. The car, and furnishing that apartment, and some down-and-out friends and a few phlegmatic horses. Not to mention a rather expensive divorce, and that hospital business. It all adds up."

"So you have about three thousand left." Obie got up and went to his filing cabinet and took out some papers.

"Something like that. I can still live in pampered luxury for a while. I won't have any more big expenses, anyhow. I'll give up that apartment. Sublet it, or something. I think I'll stay at a hotel. I can stretch the three thousand till I get something going. Don't worry about that."

"Don't *you* worry. Wait a second." Obie had some printed forms before him and was going over them assiduously. After a while he looked up. "There are lovely laws," he said, "intended to help distribute wealth, something you've been harping on for a long time. Soak the rich and help the poor. What do they do in Artichokia?"

"In Artichokia," Dale said, haughtily, "the poor are taxed to make the rich richer. Why? Because the rich make the laws. Then, if the plutocrats are threatened by any danger, internal or external, who springs to their defense, giving up everything, even their lives? Why, the poor. A lovely country, Artichokia. So like other places on this ugly globe."

"Tell me more," Obie said, with exaggerated interest. "Tell me about their income tax."

"Their *what*?" Dale sat forward suddenly. "Say that again."

"This past year, sonny boy, you were a rich man. Approximate income, eighteen thousand three hundred dollars, including a very fine ten-dollar confirmation speech. The grasping government would dearly love to get its hands on a few of those hard-earned shekels."

Dale looked at him emptily. "Ye gods," he said, weakly, "I never thought of that."

"No. You wouldn't. You with your fine and fancy speeches. What is it they do in Artichokia? It never occurred to you that some of *your* wealth might be distributed. It's always the other fellow's."

Dale took out his handkerchief and dried his nervous hands. "What were you figuring?"

"The tax. Based on last year's rates, and I'm sure they're not going to be any lower, your Federal tax and surtax will come to about eighteen hundred dollars. I'm assuming no personal exemption, because the least you can do is to let Connie take that. Then, to make things more delightful, there's the State tax, which will be about twelve hundred. It'll be close to three thousand dollars, plus or minus a hundred dollars."

"Three thousand dollars!"

"Well? Should a man who earns over eighteen thousand dollars contribute three thousand to his suffering fellowmen or shouldn't he?"

Dale nodded slowly. "A year ago I'd have said that he should give at least half. I still say it. Only I didn't think of it." He sat there, slumping, sudden defeat creeping over him. "Three thousand bucks in the bank, and I'm broke. It's almost funny. God help us." He got up wearily. "I see where I have to hang on to that three thousand. They put you away for a long time if you overlook those trifling items, don't they? Maybe I'll move back to my little room."

"Maybe you'll get down to work."

"I will," he said, eagerly. "It might be just what I need. I was never cut out for riches. I *can* do things. I know I can." He stepped toward the door, then turned before going out. "Say," he said, with a wry smile, "let me know if you hear anything about that Cowboy Waffles story."

"Hello, counsellor," Connie said, as Baxter came in. "What's new?"

"I'm going to get something," he said, eagerly. "That Hank. He's made of gold. He says he can get me a job, in a sporting-goods store. He went to everybody he knows. He told them I can sell. I can, too. Just sell. Not run a place."

"He can," Martha said, with new confidence. "I watched him in Hank's store. He has the knack." She put her hand on his arm, happy, excited. "I knew we'd get something. It was bound to come. We've been jumped on too often. Tell us. Is it certain? What is it? What will they pay?"

"It's not definite, but he says he'll surely have some-

thing before he goes. It won't pay much. Maybe twenty dollars a week. We'll get by. We will, won't we, Martha?"

Connie came closer to him, a sudden pain in her heart. "Going? Where is he going?"

"Away. Back home, I think. Some place in Pennsylvania."

"Rhodora?"

"That's it. I know he's been speaking to them on the long distance."

"He didn't tell me," Connie said, in a low voice.

"You know these strong silent men," Martha said. "They think if they say four consecutive words they lose the franchise." She put her hand on her stomach, her mind far from Connie's problems. "You know," she said, thoughtfully, "I almost think I can feel it, moving around. That's ridiculous, isn't it? It's much too early. But it's there. Maybe I should say *he's* there. Baxter insists it's a he."

Baxter inclined his head toward Connie. "So you told her."

"Sure. And soon I'll be telling the world. I want to shout it at people, want to go up to perfect strangers and tell them that I'm going to have my baby. I'm a riot. I throw up everything I eat, and I stand there and shake my head in sheer happiness. Beauty in every burp. I've gone soft. Am I getting too silly for you people? I feel as if I've been dieting on champagne. Everything goes to my head and turns to bubbles."

Baxter put his arm around her shoulder. "We're a great old couple to be having a brand new baby, aren't we?"

"It's wonderful," Connie said. "I don't know when I've seen either of you so happy."

Baxter drew himself up to his full height. He was the protector now, the man of the house. "Baxter Cunningham the Fourth," he said, proudly. "Maybe you think that doesn't mean something. I'm going to do things for that kid. Go places. Let him know his father isn't a flop." He took off his glasses and wiped them carefully, looking at them with an air of gentle defiance. "I'm only forty-five. You'd think I was an old man. No, sir. This is where we start. Jinx or no jinx. Cunningham the Third and Cunningham the Fourth, facing the world together. We aren't scared, are we, Martha?"

"Scared? What of? We've seen everything." She watched him, tenderly, hopefully. He was still a little man, but perhaps this would give him what he needed. New duties, new responsibilities. Tie that to a job and you can make a man out of what was left. One thing she knew. He would try. And she wasn't really frightened. Just the least bit. That would wear off. Nature takes care of those things. She could smile as bravely as the rest. "We have nothing to be afraid of, now." She let her hand rest in his, and knew, or perhaps she merely imagined, that his grip was firmer than it had been in years.

Connie let her body slip into the worn easy-chair. This was one of the evenings when Baxter and Martha took the long walk that Martha felt was important to her changing body. Hank sat opposite her, the shaded light falling on his eager face.

"You *are* going away," she said, wondering at the lump in her throat.

"Rhodora," he said. "They offered me a job there a few years ago. I can still have it. I phoned them the other day. I never told you that I'm the town hero. They used to

have Brady Day when I came home. I did big things in my time. I tucked a football under my arm and ran all of sixty yards. Ten years ago, and they still play it up. They forget the howling success I've made since then."

"You haven't failed, Hank. You're starting, that's all. Tell me about it. What will you do?"

"Athletic supervisor. Organize a soft-ball league, coach the basketball team, all sorts of things of a recreational nature." He nodded slowly, thinking. "It's funny. I got through college because I was a football player, not an engineer. I weathered the depression by racing up and down a basketball court in my underwear. Good, solid constructive work. Now I'm going to fall back on my athletic ability again. I suppose that's the only way I could ever get by."

"No, Hank. This time it's doing something, helping humanity, just what you wanted. The most important part of humanity. Kids."

"I always was a sucker for kids."

"Leader of men. The men of tomorrow. Why not? The future of the world depends on them. Give them a good start."

"You can make it sound all right." He paused for a moment. "It is important, building up the bodies of skinny kids, isn't it? Come to think of it, there aren't many things more important. That gives me the feeling I need."

"You *will* lead them. You'll be part of them, one of them, living their lives, dreaming their dreams."

"Maybe. It wasn't exactly what I had in mind. You know the longing some people have to get back to the soil. I wanted to get under it. There must be a heritage there. A big chunk went out of my life when my Dad died. I had some sort of inner feeling, to know what killed him, why

he died, to go through what he did and learn how to conquer it. You get soft, though, and you hate to think of swinging a pick in the darkness of the mines. This will bring me closer to it, though. I want to learn. To help."

"You'll always help people, no matter where you are or what you do. That's the way you are." She pulled herself forward in the chair, her face closer to his. "Tell me about Rhodora," she said. "It's such a lovely name, so soft, and musical. What does it mean?"

"I don't know. Funny, I never thought of finding out. We can pretend it's Greek for City of Darkness."

She shook her head. "As long as we're pretending, let's say it's City of Hope."

"More likely it was named after Oswald J. Rhodora, a stout man with a bald head and flat feet. It's a little mining town, not far from Pittsburgh. Population, about eighteen thousand, two hotels, a bustling little up-and-coming town, especially when the mines are going."

They sat quietly, looking off into the darkness. He moved over to the arm of her chair. After a while he felt her hand on top of his, and then he put his arm around her and their faces turned toward each other, their lips close for a second, then meeting. They stayed that way for a long time. Nobody had to tell Connie what she felt. She knew. Something inside of her, moving, stirring, something she couldn't define, bringing her closer to him, making her part of him, not for now but for all time. She wasn't cold. Not with the emotions that were surging through her now.

He moved his head back, cupping her soft neck in his hands. "It isn't fair, Connie," he said, softly. "I'm nobody, trying to get a foothold in a small town, starting where other men leave off. I can't do that to you. Make

you part of it. You've had too much of struggle. I would like to get a promise from you. Don't give up on me too soon. I want you, more than anything in life. Give me a chance. It may take a little time. I don't know what I'll make of this thing, but I want to try. Wait for me, will you, sweet?"

There was a pattern of life that included starched shirt-waists and lunches at Schrafft's, and you give that up and trek off to the jungle and wonder what made you do it. It's what you want that counts. Only that. There was a little smoky town near Pittsburgh, a mining town with run-down shacks and struggling families, but Hank would be there, and nothing else mattered very much. She didn't have to make up her mind, because there was no decision to be made. She knew. She let her head drop against his shoulder. "Wait for you, hell," she said, gently. "I'm going with you."

She could feel his arms tighten around her. They sat that way, quiet, watching the lights twinkling softly in the distance, their eyes turned toward Rhodora, City of Darkness, toward Rhodora, City of Hope.

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